

FACELESS VICTIMS

RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHRISTIANS IN **IRAN**

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

A Joint Report





“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.”



Nazila Ghanea

*The UN’s Special Rapporteur on
Freedom of Religion or Belief*



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	02
Freedom of Religion or Belief Under National and International Law	04
Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran	07
Timeline of 2023 Violations	18
Table of Prisoners	23
Criminal Procedure as Applied to Christians	27
Trends	28
Analysis	30
Recommendations	35



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many Iranian citizens experienced a renewed yearning for change following the protests stemming from the death in custody of Mahsa (Zhina) Amini in September 2022 and subsequent attempted cover-up. The Iranian authorities struggled to suppress the protests and aspirations of the Iranian people, despite the use of excessive force and executions without due process. The case reveals a broader aspect of Iran's gross violations of international norms concerning freedom of expression, women's rights, and freedom of religion or belief, which affects many religious groups in Iran, including Christians. The widespread longing for human rights to be upheld in Iran, and for the freedoms and rights of all citizens to be respected, is a hope shared by the Iranian Christian community. In September 2023 multiple Iranian Christian organisations, ministries and churches signed a joint **communiqué** on the anniversary of Mahsa (Zhina) Amini's death to call for "respect for human rights and ending the rule of discrimination and injustice for all Iranians".

In 2023, Iranians' fundamental freedoms continued to be curtailed by state authorities. This report seeks to shed light on the challenges faced by the Christian community within the wider context of Iranian society.

For a religious community, the section on **Freedom of Religion or Belief in National and International Law** is of particular relevance to the protection of the rights and religious liberty of Christians in Iran.

The section on **Rights Violations against Christians in Iran** details, with examples, the specific abuses of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) that affect the Christians.





Unfortunately, Christians who actively express their faith – and especially converts from Islam – are subject to arrest and prosecution by the State. Looking back at 2023, we provide a **Timeline of Violations** against Christians in Iran, and the section on **Criminal Procedure as Applied to Christians** elaborates on the charges commonly brought against them. The report also includes a **Table of Prisoners** – Christians who either were detained or sent into exile in 2023 on account of their faith or Christian activities.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution the Iranian regime has illustrated a consistency in its oppression of Christians which meets the international definition of persecution as articulated in the Rome Statute. However, the manner in which this persecution is expressed continues to adapt and change. The section on **Trends** highlights the contemporary pattern of persecution and its effects on the Christian community.

The Rome Statute defines persecution as “the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity”

(Art. 7.2. g)

We also include an **Analysis** section on **How Pressures on Christians and Their Families Continue Even After Their Release from Prison**, and the report concludes with **Recommendations** for the Islamic Republic of Iran to respect the rights and freedoms of its citizens, and for the international community to hold the Iranian authorities accountable for failing to comply with international law on human rights, and offer practical ways to help victims.

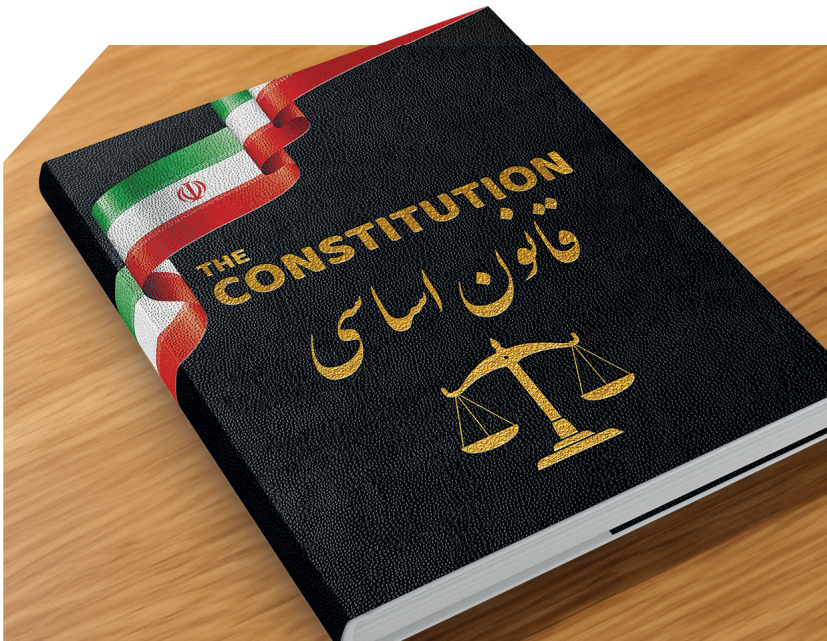


FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

Iran is a diverse country, home to a variety of religious and ethnic groups whose presence in the area is historically established. The rights and freedoms of all citizens regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliation are protected by laws, both national and international. However, since the 1979 revolution the government has imposed a homogeneous Iranian identity with an Islamic Shi'a belief system, resulting in the repression of other groups – their culture, traditions and religious beliefs being considered a threat to the Islamic Republic and its values.

The first article of the Iranian constitution institutes a theocracy, with Article 12 establishing the Twelver Ja'fari school of Shi'a Islam as the nation's official religion. Accordingly, all Iranian laws must be derived from, and consistent with, Islamic law.



Article 13 of the constitution states:

"Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognised 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."

Aside from Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity, no other religious minorities are recognised by law or afforded rights under the constitution. Meanwhile, the Christian community in Iran is restricted in the eyes of the authorities to ethnic Armenians, Assyrians, and a small expatriate community. These groups are relatively free to practise their faith, though they face legal and societal discrimination, are not permitted to hold services or possess religious materials in Persian (the national language), and can face imprisonment if they promote Christianity among people from a Muslim background or have them attend church services.





Meanwhile, Christian converts¹ from Islam are numerically² the largest Christian community in Iran, but they are not recognised by the state and are frequently targeted by the authorities and, in some cases, by their extended families and society.

Unable to attend existing churches belonging to the Armenian and Assyrian communities, converts either gather in informal meetings in private homes, known as “house-churches”, for prayer, worship, and Bible study, or are forced to remain isolated and disconnected from other Christians. In both cases, their freedom to collectively express their faith is violated.



With converts constituting the largest – albeit unrecognised – Christian community in Iran, the issue of “apostasy” is a central concern. Apostasy has never been codified by the Islamic Republic, and differences in interpretation of Islamic law regarding apostasy contribute to a lack of certainty and consistency in how converts from Islam are treated. In late 2022, a retired Iranian judge involved in approving the penal code **said** “apostasy was supposed to be included in our criminal code, but it was left out for fear of international pressure”.

Although a Christian convert was **sentenced** to be hanged for apostasy in 2010, the charge of apostasy and death sentence were overturned in response to international pressure, but many converts have since been **threatened** with a similar fate upon arrest and during interrogations. The last time a Christian convert was officially **executed** for apostasy was in 1990, but typically converts and other Persian-speaking Christians³ are oppressed in alternative ways, being subjected to restrictions and multiple violations of their fundamental rights without facing judicial execution for apostasy.⁴

¹ Christian converts show allegiance to various denominations or church movements. This report includes the violations suffered by the “Church of Iran” network of house-churches, whose members hold an unorthodox theology of the Trinity but maintain that salvation is through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

² A **survey** of Iranians’ attitudes towards religion in 2020, conducted by a secular Netherlands-based research group, revealed that 1.5% of Iranians from a sample size of 50,000 self-identified as Christians. Based on this, and taking into account possible skewing from the type of people who chose to respond, researchers estimated there could be as many as 800,000 Christians in Iran overall. Ethnic Assyrian and Armenian Christians account for approximately 50,000–80,000, the remainder being converts from Islam.

³ In this report the term “Persian-speaking Christians” is used to denote both converts and Armenian and Assyrian Christians who wish to worship in the national language of Persian.

⁴ Rev Hossein Soodmand remains the only Iranian Christian to have been officially executed for his “apostasy”, though others have been sentenced to death or killed extra-judicially.



The Anglican church in Shiraz has not been allowed to hold services since Covid-19 restrictions were imposed in 2020.

This mistreatment of the Christian community – both recognised and unrecognised – violates Iran’s obligations as a signatory to the ICCPR, which Iran ratified without reservation in 1975 and is obliged to uphold, along with other international treaties to which it is a signatory. In October 2023, the UN Human Rights Committee assessed the Islamic Republic’s compliance with the ICCPR, and recommended, among other issues, that Iran “should ensure respect for the right to freedom of religion or belief, including by ensuring that legislation and practices conform to Article 18 of the Covenant [regarding freedom of religion or belief], taking into account general comments No. 22 (1993) on the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and No. 34 (2011) on freedoms of opinion and expression; [...] guarantee the right of everyone to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his or her choice and to change his or her religion; [and] ensure the freedom to manifest this religion or belief, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, without being penalised”.⁵

By failing to fulfil the civil and political rights of all its citizens, the Islamic Republic contravenes **Article 2.1 of the ICCPR**, whereby: “Each State Party ... undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the present Covenant, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

⁵ ‘Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under Article 40 of the Covenant, fourth periodic report of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Human Rights Committee, 139th session, Summary record of the 4038th and 4039th meetings held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, 9-10 October 2023,’ <https://docstore.ohchr.org>

RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHRISTIANS IN IRAN



The extent of the oppression experienced by members of the Christian community is illustrated in the following overview of articles of the ICCPR that are contravened by the Iranian authorities:

Article 7: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

Many Christians report severe mistreatment during arrest and detention, such as Christian convert Ali Kazemian, who testified in his [Witness Statement](#) in January 2023 that his interrogators “discovered that I had a metal implant in my left leg from an historic break” and “for this reason, one of the agents kicked my left leg several times. Then they put me on a chair, tied my hands together, and the interrogator said: ‘You are now in an electric chair’... Then they violently punched me several times. In addition to this physical torture, they inflicted a lot of mental and emotional torture on me, and it was easier for me to endure the physical torture than the mental. They threatened me that: ‘We’ll harm your wife and children! ... We’ll bring your wife to the interrogation room and strip her naked in front of everyone, to see if you can really resist and stay quiet!’”



Article 9.1: “Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention. No one shall be deprived of his liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law.”

The UN’s Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruled in 2021 that the Iranian government was [detaining Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani arbitrarily](#), and called for his immediate release. The Working Group found the pastor’s detention lacked legal basis, that he was penalised for his “legitimate exercise” of freedoms, that he was not afforded a fair trial or due process, and that he had faced “discrimination based on religious beliefs”. Consequently, the Working Group called not only for Pastor Nadarkhani’s immediate release, but also for compensation and “other reparations” to be given to him, and for Iran to conduct an independent investigation into his arbitrary detention and to hold those responsible accountable. Even so, the pastor remained in detention for two more years until his [“pardoning”](#) in February 2023.



In recent years several Christian converts have also been deprived of their liberty by being sentenced to terms of exile in remote parts of the country in violation of Article 9.1, including Pastor Nadarkhani, whose two-year sentence of exile has yet to be officially quashed despite his pardoning.

Article 9.2: “Anyone who is arrested shall be informed, at the time of arrest, of the reasons for his arrest and shall be promptly informed of any charges against him.”

Many arrested Christians report that they were not informed of the reason for their arrest, neither did they receive any charges, such as Christian convert Shahnaz Jizan, the wife of church leader Farhad Sabokrooh, who testified in their 2022 [Witness Statement](#): “After three days [in detention], I told [my interrogators] that I needed to talk

to my children. 'I still don't know why I was arrested!' I said. 'My husband has also been arrested; you can interrogate him, but let me be with my children!' The interrogator said: 'You're here for the crime of Christianity!' They demanded that Farhad and I write down the names of our church members in Ahvaz, and also in the other cities where Farhad supervised churches. They said: 'You have overstepped the limits we set for you! You have rebelled! We will not allow you to convert Muslims to Christianity!'"

Article 9.3: “Anyone arrested or detained on a criminal charge shall be brought promptly before a judge or other officer authorized by law to exercise judicial power and shall be entitled to trial within a reasonable time or to release.”



Assyrian church leader Victor Bet-Tamraz, who was **sentenced** to 10 years in prison in 2017 for leading a house-church, **said** the subsequent three years awaiting his appeal hearing was a “very difficult time”. “There were usually three or four appeal hearings scheduled each year, and when they announced the date – two months before each hearing – your worrying started and you no longer had peace of mind, because you didn't know what would happen,” he explained. “...You come and go, but when this game is over, that's the hard part. There is a saying in Persian: **'It's a game for a cat, but death for the mouse.'** You experience this death several times during each year – at least three or four times – so in three years, if you add it up, we experienced this 12 times!”

Article 10.1: “All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.”

The dire conditions in Iranian prisons have been regularly referenced in the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Iran, Javaid Rehman.

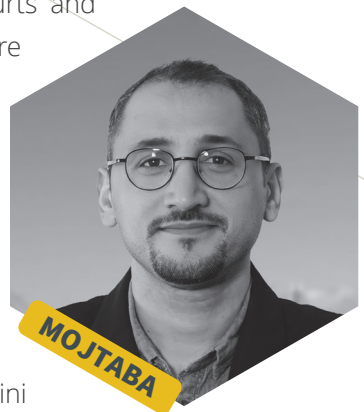
Confirmation of allegations of poor conditions and degrading treatment comes from Christian prisoners of conscience, such as Christian convert Touraj Shirani, who testified in his November 2023 **Witness Statement**: “My cell was very small: about one and a half by two square metres. The toilet in the cell was very dirty. There was a simple water pipe above the toilet, but it only gave out cold water. A 30cm-high wall separated the toilet from the rest of the cell, but as I slept my head was right next to the toilet. During the times I had to share my cell with another prisoner, if one of us wanted to take a shower, the other had to stand up so the water wouldn't fall onto his head. There was a carpet in the cell, and that was what I had to sleep on. They gave me three blankets, but they were so dirty that I preferred to use my shoes as a pillow. On the second day of my detention, I cleaned the toilet with water, as there was no cleaning fluid, but it didn't help. The environment was very unsanitary. I was still in the clothes they had arrested me in, and wasn't ever given any new clothes, nor were my family allowed to bring me any. The food quality in the detention centre was also very poor.”



Article 14.1: “All persons shall be equal before the courts and tribunals. In the determination of any criminal charge against him, or of his rights and obligations in a suit at law, everyone shall be entitled to a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal established by law.”

Members of the Christian community routinely fail to be afforded equality before courts and tribunals, or a fair and public hearing before competent, independent courts of law. Many are brought before Revolutionary Courts, which are generally closed to the public, and fail to ensure due process.

Christians claim that Iranian intelligence had already decided on their sentence before a court hearing took place. In other instances, judges were under pressure to make decisions in accordance with the directives from the Intelligence Ministry.



In his **Notes from Prison** in March 2023, Christian convert Mojtaba Hosseini described how: “The judge in our case, who received his orders directly from the Ministry of Intelligence, constantly put us under pressure psychologically, in various ways.”



Meanwhile, Touraj Shirani testified in his **Witness Statement** that the Intelligence Ministry ordered the judge presiding over his case to issue a two-year sentence: “The judge kept shaking his head and saying: ‘Wow! Oh, wow! There is also the charge of apostasy! The Intelligence Ministry has suggested a two-year sentence, but you will have to go to prison for five more years because of the things you have done!’”

Additionally, Christian convert Vahid Hakani, who was imprisoned alongside Mojtaba Hosseini, **testified** in June 2023: “Judge Rashidi was very rude and disrespected us regularly. I once said to him: ‘Can I ask you to be our judge, instead of the complainant? The Ministry of Intelligence and the prosecutor are supposed to be the complainants. You are supposed to judge between us and them, but you talk as if you are the complainant.’”

Article 14.2: “Everyone charged with a criminal offence shall have the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law.”

Before his court hearing, Touraj Shirani went to the prosecutor’s office to follow up on his case and was told his verdict had already been decided.

“After insulting us a lot, [the prosecutor] called for two officers to come to take us to a room and detain us. This was completely illegal. We were kept in that detention room for the rest of that morning, all the way until 4pm. Then the prosecutor came and said: ‘I have already discussed everything with you. You are apostates, so it is clear what your verdict will be! It has already been decided! You will be informed about it later.’”

In addition, Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz said of his numerous court hearings: “It is just you and the judge; there is no one else. The lawyer is with you, but they [the judges] don’t listen to anyone anyway. It seems they have already decided. It’s just a game.”

Article 14.3: “In the determination of any criminal charge against him, everyone shall be entitled to the following minimum guarantees ... (d) To be tried in his presence, and to defend himself in person or through legal assistance of his own choosing.”

On 26 June 2021, at the 4th Branch of the Revolutionary Court in Karaj, Judge Mehdi Zeinali **claimed** that the lawyer defending three Christian converts had not completed the necessary documentation and refused to allow him to represent his clients. The Christians were subsequently obliged to represent themselves and were each sentenced to five years in prison under the **amended** Article 500 – “engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam”.

In the case of Iranian-Armenian pastor Anooshavan Avedian, who began a 10-year prison sentence in September 2023, his appeal hearing took place **in absentia** despite repeated requests by his lawyer for the hearing to take place in person.

It should also be noted that in all cases involving alleged “national security” violations – such as the majority of Christian cases – defendants are only able to choose from a set of pre-approved lawyers during the initial investigation stage.

Article 14.7: “No one shall be liable to be tried or punished again for an offence for which he has already been finally convicted or acquitted in accordance with the law and penal procedure of each country.”

In January 2022, Christian convert and church leader Abdolreza (Matthias) Ali-Haghnejad was **re-arrested and detained** on charges of “propagating Christianity”, for which he had been acquitted on appeal back in December 2014, after a Supreme Court judge overturned the acquittal.

In clear contravention of Article 14.7, Pastor Ali-Haghnejad is now serving this six-year sentence in Minab Prison.



Article 17.1: “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his honour and reputation.”

The Iranian authorities are using increasingly sophisticated techniques to monitor citizens, including Christians.

In April 2023, US-based researchers **reported** that intelligence officers belonging to the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran, or FARAJA, were using spyware to monitor members of minority communities, including Christians. The spyware is capable of extracting data, including photographs, screenshots of conversations, and recordings of video calls, from applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram, and most victims live in minority areas, including West Azerbaijan Province, home to many Armenian and Assyrian Christians. A researcher said: “In particular, about 25 victim locations were gathered in the city of Orumiye, West Azerbaijan Province, which is historically associated with Armenian and Assyrian Christianity. Some files stolen from victims indicate Christian faith, particularly snippets or scanned sections of relevant books.”

Meanwhile, Touraj Shirani testified in his **Witness Statement** that Iranian intelligence continued to monitor him and his family after his release on bail. “One of the major challenges we endured as a family after my release was the fact they kept following us, and even installed a listening device in our house. We were talking once, when one of my daughters asked, sadly: ‘Why won’t they just leave us alone?’ That very moment, the Ministry of Intelligence called us and said: ‘Shut up!’ Then they repeated to me what they had heard.”



Article 18.1: “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.”

The questions that Iranian intelligence agents ask arrested Christian converts leave little doubt that their change in faith is the primary reason for their detention.

In his 2021 **Witness Statement**, Christian convert Iman Ghaznavian Haghghi listed the questions he was repeatedly asked by interrogators, which included: “When and how did you start to believe in Jesus Christ? Where did you get your Bible? How many people did you evangelise? Why did you evangelise?”



Another Christian convert, Mojtaba Keshavarz Ahmadi, testified in his 2022 **Witness Statement**: “My interrogators told me frankly and boldly: ‘You have no



rights and no choice because your religion has already been chosen for you... You were born a Muslim, and Shiite. Shiite blood runs in your veins and you don't have any other choice! But religion or belief isn't something that can be inherited or transmitted through blood."

Article 18.2: “No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.”

The increasingly common practice of religious “re-education” is a clear violation of Article 18.2. For example, in 2022, 10 Christian converts in Dezful were **forced to attend Islamic re-education classes** even though eight of them, who had been arrested in April 2021, had been acquitted of all wrongdoing in November 2021.

Many Christian converts have also reported that they have been subjected to coercion to recant their faith during interrogation after their arrest, while some have reported that family members have been brought in to try to persuade them to return to Islam.

Article 18.3: “Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.”

In 2019, Iran’s Supreme Court ruled that nine Christian converts sentenced to five years in prison for their membership of house-churches should not have been charged with “acting against national security”.

“Merely preaching Christianity, and promoting the ‘Evangelical Zionist sect’, both of which apparently means propagating Christianity through family gatherings [house-churches] is not a manifestation of gathering and collusion to disrupt the security of the country, whether internally or externally,” the verdict stated, adding that the “formation of these societies and groups [house-churches] is not [a breach of] Articles 498 and 499 of the Islamic Penal Code [relating to membership or organisation of “anti-state groups”], or other criminal laws.”

But despite this ruling, Christians have continued to be charged under these legal provisions for the same “offence”.

Lawyer Iman Soleimani, who represented three Christian converts **sentenced to five years in prison** in 2022 for being part of a house-church, told the court his clients’ only “crime” had been to meet together for prayer and worship. He added that a religious assembly could not be considered an “action against the state”.



Article 18.4: “The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.”



Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani first came to the attention of the authorities after complaining that his sons’ school was forcing his children to take classes in Islamic Studies and the Quran. Members of recognised religious minorities – including Christians – are ordinarily exempt from these classes, but children of converts to Christianity, such as Pastor Nadarkhani’s, are not afforded this right as they are still considered Muslims. The pastor received a **death sentence** for apostasy, which was quashed following an international outcry. However, after being sent back to prison for house-church activities, he continued to fight for his children’s right to be educated, engaging in a **three-week hunger strike** in 2019. His son Youeil was later denied his high-school certificate and hence an opportunity for further education because he had not completed his Islamic education.

The coercion of the children of Christian converts to attend classes in Islamic Studies and the Quran also violates Article 14.1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: “States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” The Islamic Republic of Iran ratified this Convention in 1994.

Article 19.1: “Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.”

The authorities frequently attempt to interfere with the right of Christians to hold their own opinion, particularly with regard to their religion.

In his **Witness Statement** in July 2023, Christian convert Aliasghar (Amid) Fathollahi testified: “During the interrogations, they always faced me against the wall, and their table was behind me. The first time they allowed me to remove my blindfold was to talk to a seminary student about Islam, who tried to convince me to return but couldn’t.”



Article 19.2: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.”



The amended Article 500 of the penal code, which the UN Human Rights Committee **said** in October should be “repealed or amended”, includes a prohibition of “psychological manipulation” or “mind control” by members of “sects” – a label frequently **used** by Iranian officials to refer to house-churches.



ALIREZA



MILAD



AMIN



MORTEZA



AHMAD

The amended article has since been used to convict several Christian converts, including **Amin Khaki, Milad Goodarzi and Alireza Nourmohammadi** in 2021, and **Ahmad Sarparast, Morteza Mashoodkari and Ayoob Poor-Rezazadeh** in 2022, and was **termed** “a full-on attack on the right to freedom of religion and belief”.

“The passage of these provisions despite warnings about their grave consequences for human rights only demonstrates that the Iranian authorities are adamant to stifle any expression that does not align with their liking,” said Saloua Ghazouani of ARTICLE19, an NGO focused on freedom of expression.



AYOOB

Article 21: “The right of peaceful assembly shall be recognized. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order (ordre public), the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”

According to the Human Rights Committee, an Assembly may “serve other goals, such as an entertainment, cultural, religious or commercial objective, and still be protected under Article 21”.⁶

The right of Persian-speaking Christians to assemble peacefully for worship has been consistently violated. Christian converts sought to participate in the Persian-language services conducted by established churches. However, over the past 15 years the authorities have forced these churches to refuse admission to converts and cease Persian-language services, **closing down** the churches that refused to comply.

Just four Persian-language churches now remain, although unable to function freely – the Anglican churches of St Luke in Isfahan, St Paul in Julfa (a suburb of Isfahan), St Paul in Tehran and St Simon the Zealot in Shiraz. Members must be able to prove that they were Christian before the revolution of 1979, and the churches are not permitted to accept new members. These churches were closed in line with other public places of worship under the health provisions during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, unlike other places of worship, they have **not been permitted to reopen** since restrictions were lifted.

⁶ ‘General Comment No. 37 on Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – Right of Peaceful Assembly’





The vast majority of Persian-speaking Christians have therefore been denied opportunities to assemble in public spaces and have been forced to congregate in private gatherings, known as house-churches, which are subjected to raids by Ministry of Intelligence agents or the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, under the guise of protecting “national security”. However, in several rulings even the Iranian judiciary has **recognised** that worship in house-churches does not endanger national security.

The failure of the Iranian regime to uphold the right of Christian converts to meet together as prescribed by Articles 18 and 21 of the ICCPR led to the **#Place2Worship campaign**: a call for Persian-speaking Christians to be given a place to worship, which is actively supported by Iranian Christian converts at home and in the diaspora, some of whom have themselves endured jail sentences for attending house-churches.

Article 26: “All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

Shia Islam is the official state religion and all laws must be consistent with the official interpretation of Islamic law (Sharia). The Constitution bans parliament from passing laws contrary to Islam, and states that there may be no amendment to its provisions related to the “Islamic character” of the political or legal system or to the specification of Shia Ja’fari Islam as the official religion.

The fact that all laws are in conformity with Shia Islam suggests an inherent inequality before the law for non-adherents. It also explains why even reformists within the government are conservative, and why Christians and other religious minorities are barred from high office and other influential positions within the system.

Emmanuel Persian-Speaking Evangelical Church

After this church was forced to ban Persian-speaking Christians from attending services in 2013, the sign outside was changed from “Emmanuel Persian-Speaking Evangelical Church” to “Emmanuel Evangelical Church: For Armenians Only”



Since the promotion of any faith besides Shi'a Islam is regarded as unlawful, Christians face discrimination when arrested, during interrogation, and throughout the judicial process. Along with adherents of other minority religions, they are not treated as equal citizens by the Iranian authorities.

Article 881 of the Iranian Civil Code provides that when an *infidel* (unbeliever) dies, if there is any Muslim among the beneficiaries, this legatee inherits all of the property, even if he/she is a distant relative. Even recognised religious minorities are referred to as *infidels* in this article.

Article 1059 of the Iranian Civil Code prohibits marriage between a Muslim female and non-Muslim male, but permits the marriage of a Muslim male and non-Muslim female.

Meanwhile, Article 234 of the penal code also discriminates along religious lines, prescribing the death penalty for a non-Muslim man who has sex outside marriage with a Muslim woman, but not the other way around.

In addition, except for three out of five designated seats for religious minorities in the Iranian parliament, or *Majlis*, Christians are not permitted to hold public offices including the judiciary and presidency, neither can they be elected to local councils. This also constitutes a restriction of their right under Article 25 of the ICCPR "to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives".

Article 27: "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."

Christians who wish to practise their faith in the national language of Persian – whether converts, or members of the recognised Armenian and Assyrian churches – are unable to do so, as the churches that once offered Persian-language services were **forced** to cease this provision or close, while meeting together privately within their own homes to practise their faith is **considered** an "act against national security".

"There are many churches in Iran, some of which are considered historical monuments," Vahid Hakani **explained** in his Witness Statement. "... But the government of the Islamic Republic doesn't allow Persian-speakers to become members and participate in the meetings in the church buildings... Persian-speakers aren't able to enter the church and participate in the services. The sermons also aren't in the Persian language, so Persian-speaking Christian converts are forced to gather secretly in their homes and pray and have Christian fellowship with other Christians in house-churches."

Meanwhile, Persian Bibles and other Christian literature is frequently confiscated during raids on Christian homes, including Mr Hakani's.

"They took everything related to Christianity, such as Bibles, Christian books and CDs, and even the picture of Christ that was on the wall," he explained.



TIMELINE OF RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN 2023

Comparatively few Christians were arrested in the first half of 2023, but this all changed in the summer, when **more than 100 Christians** were arrested within the space of three months.

However, the vast majority of these Christians opted not to publicise their situation, in the hope it may help their cases, meaning that despite a comparable number of Christians being arrested in 2023 as in previous years – 166 arrests were documented in 2023, compared to 134 in 2022 – fewer names and faces could be publicised.

Meanwhile, a number of Christians were **pardoned** and released from prison in 2023, though it should be noted that the majority were already nearing the end of their sentences. Moreover, these sentences related to the peaceful practice of their faith and therefore should never have been issued in the first place.

03
JANUARY

The first arrest reported in 2023 took place on 3 January, when Anahita Khademi, the wife of Christian prisoner of conscience, Matthias Ali-Haghnejad, was **transferred to Lakan Prison** in Rasht, where her husband and two other church members, Masoud V and Amir R, were also being held. Anahita was released on bail on 28 January, after being **charged** with “propaganda against the state” and “disturbing public opinion”. As noted earlier, Pastor Ali-Haghnejad is currently serving a six-year sentence for “propagating Christianity”, having previously been **acquitted**. In July, he was **transferred** to a prison in Minab on the other side of the country, 1,000 miles from his home and family, and only able to see them again five months later when permitted a **short furlough** from prison. He was also forced to pay for his own flights.

10
JANUARY

On 10 January, **Mohammad Golbaz**, a Christian convert who had been arrested in 2022, was sentenced to six months in prison for “propaganda against the state”, under Article 500, though this was not reported publicly at the time. Mohammad’s sentence was suspended for five years, dependent upon his future conduct.

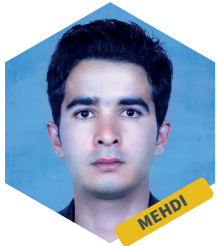
Meanwhile, two Christians - brothers arrested during the 2022 protests, whose faith became apparent during their interrogations - were fired from their jobs after their release from prison in January 2023, though again this was not reported publicly.





SAHEB

The first release of a Christian from prison in 2023 came on 9 February, when Zaman (Saheb) Fadaie, who had been detained since July 2018, was unexpectedly **freed** as part of a wider pardoning of prisoners ahead of the 44th anniversary of the Islamic Republic. However, it should be noted that Mr Fadaie was already nearing the end of his **six-year sentence** – which had been reduced from **10 years** – and that he was convicted on unfounded charges that are religious in nature: namely, “propagating house-churches and promoting ‘Zionist’ Christianity”. He was also **flogged** following his release for failing to report back to prison on time after a short furlough, having previously been **flogged** as part of a separate conviction for drinking wine at Holy Communion. Mr Fadaie was also initially **told** that despite his pardoning, his sentence of two years’ exile to the remote city of Nehbandan remained, but in August he was **informed** he would no longer have to serve this sentence, though he received no official documentation to verify this.



MEHDI

On 10 February, Christian convert Mehdi Rokhparvar, who had been serving a five-year sentence for “acting against national security” by “forming an illegal evangelical Christian group”, was **pardoned and released**.

On 15 February, another Christian convert, Hadi (Moslem) Rahimi, was **pardoned** after spending more than a year in prison for “acting against national security” by “spreading ‘Zionist’ Christianity”.



MOSLEM

On 26 February, Yousef Nadarkhani was **pardoned and released** after nearly five years in Tehran’s Evin Prison. Like Saheb Fadaie, Pastor Nadarkhani was serving a six-year sentence, reduced from 10 years, on the same charges. He too had been flogged and initially told he still faced two years in exile, only to be told otherwise on another occasion - though only unofficially.

Also in February, a female Christian convert, Sakine (Mehri) Behjati, was pardoned and released from the remainder of her two-year sentence for “acting against national security by attending house-churches and spreading ‘Zionist’ Christianity”. She had been in prison since April 2022.

In early March, Christian converts Milad Goodarzi, Amin Khaki and Alireza Nourmohammadi - the first converts to be **charged** and **sentenced** under the amended **Article 500** - were **released**, though Milad and Alireza were later **rearrested**, along with and Alireza’s brother Amir. Both Alireza and Amir remained in detention at the end of 2023.

In March, it also became clear that a church of huge significance for Iranian Christians was **set to be sold** by an organisation headed by Iran’s Supreme Leader. The Assemblies of God (AOG) church in Gorgan, northeast Iran, had over the years been led by some of the most well-known Iranian pastors, including three who were killed on account of their faith. For more than 25 years, the church building, which was founded by murdered bishop **Haik Hovsepian**, had stood empty and dormant, a relic of a former time when it was briefly possible in the early days of the Islamic Republic for Christians, even converts, to meet inside a church building.

09
FEBRUARY10
FEBRUARY15
FEBRUARY26
FEBRUARY

MAR



As with many other Christian properties in recent years, the closure of the Gorgan AOG church has followed a familiar pattern, beginning with forced closure, then clandestine confiscation when it is less likely to garner attention, followed by gradual appropriation by the Iranian state. Meanwhile, May 2023, marked the 10th anniversary of the **forced closure** of the Central Assemblies of God Church in Tehran (left), the largest Persian-speaking church in Iran.

13
MARCH

On 13 March, Iranian-Armenian pastor Joseph Shahbazian, who was serving a **10-year sentence** for holding church services, was informed that his application for a retrial had been **accepted** by the Supreme Court. On 24 May, Pastor Shahbazian's sentence was **reduced** to two years, as the court did not find "enough evidence to determine the maximum punishment specified in Article 498 of the Islamic Penal Code", which relates to the organisation of groups that "threaten national security". On 13 September, Pastor Shahbazian was unexpectedly **pardoned and released**. He had been in Evin Prison for just over a year. However, on the very same day as his release, Anooshavan Avedian, another Iranian-Armenian pastor sentenced to 10 years in prison for "propaganda contrary to and disturbing to the holy religion of Islam" and "membership and leadership of Evangelical house-churches", was **told** he must begin his sentence. Pastor Avedian handed himself in to the authorities at Evin Prison five days later.



09
APRIL

On 9 April, Easter Day, Christian converts Sara Ahmadi and husband Homayoun Zhavah, who has advanced Parkinson's disease, were informed that their application for a retrial had been **accepted**. They were both **acquitted and released** from Evin Prison on 9 May.



24
APRIL

On 24 April, a female Christian convert, Malihe Nazari, who was sentenced alongside Joseph Shahbazian, was **released** early from her six-year sentence for "acting against national security through membership and leadership of Evangelical house-churches". Mohabat News **reported** that the Supreme Court had ruled in her favour due to the health of her son, who has leukaemia.

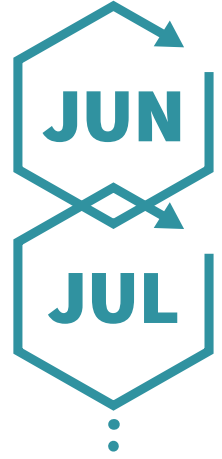


09
MAY

On 9 May, three female converts to Christianity were arrested and held incommunicado in Tehran's Evin Prison for 40 days and denied access to a lawyer, according to US-based Christian organisation **Mehr Ministries**. Spokesman Hamid Hatami said that when their families were finally able to visit them in prison, Shilan Oraminejad, Razieh (Maral) Kohzady, and Zahra (Yalda) Heidary "were not in a good physical condition". On 29 June, Mehr **reported** that Shilan Oraminejad and Zahra Heidary had been released on bail, but that Maral Kohzady remained in custody, with a court hearing scheduled for 2 July at the 28th Branch of the Revolutionary Court of Tehran. There has been no update since.



Then came the rash of arrests over the summer, with dozens of Christians **arrested** over a seven-week period in June and July alone in 11 Iranian cities: namely, Tehran, Karaj, Rasht, Orumiyeh, Aligoudarz, Isfahan, Shiraz, Semnan, Garmsar, Varamin and Eslamshahr. Most of those released were forced to sign commitments to refrain from further Christian activities or were ordered to attend Islamic re-education sessions. Others said they were summoned for further questioning in the days after their release, or were ordered to leave Iran. One said his employment was terminated at the request of intelligence agents. Reported bail amounts ranged between 400 million (\$8,000) and 2 billion tomans (\$40,000), though Iranian-Armenian Christian Elisa Shahverdian was initially **told** she must pay the equivalent of \$100,000.



The arbitrary nature of these arrests is illustrated by the fact that arrestees who were eventually coerced into signing commitments to refrain from Christian activities no longer faced further legal action.

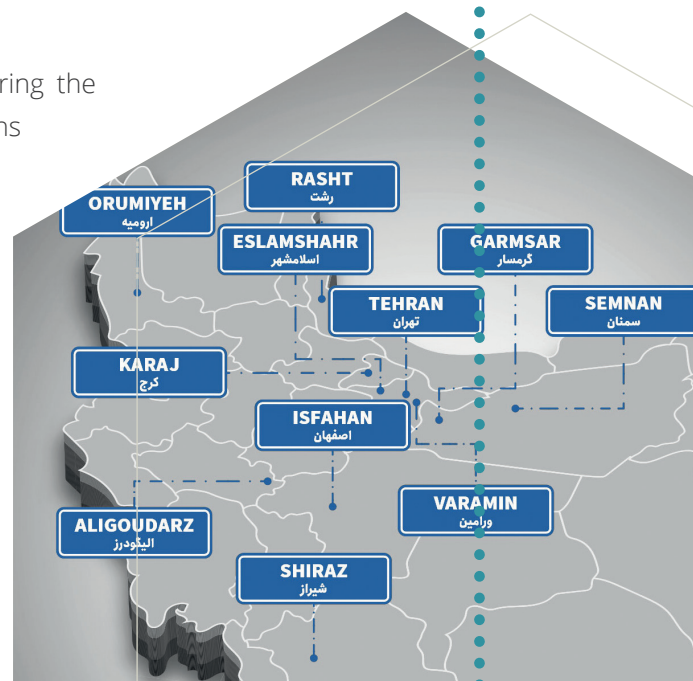
The majority of those arrested were converts to Christianity; however, several ethnic Armenians were also detained, including Elisa Shahverdian's husband, Hakop Gochumyan, who **remained detained** at the end of 2023. The rash of arrests coincided with a renewed crackdown on the Baha'i community, which is also an unrecognised religious minority group.

Noting that the Iranian authorities had commenced "a fresh crackdown on civil liberties", Article18's director, Mansour Borji, added that the "traditionally vulnerable groups, such as Christians, are on the frontline of those targeted", and suggested that the return of a more forceful approach by the authorities, including a renewed crackdown by the morality police, may have been intended "to send out a message, both nationally and internationally," ahead of the anniversary of the death of Mahsa (Zhina) Amini, "that [the authorities] are not moved or deterred".



By the end of 2023, at least 17 of the Christians arrested during the summer had received prison sentences of between three months and five years, or non-custodial punishments such as fines, flogging, and in one case the community-service of digging graves, on charges of "propaganda against the state", under the amended Article 500, or "establishing and leading a house-church", under Article 498.

There were also a significant number of arrests over the Christmas period, with at least 46 arrests across eight cities: Tehran, Karaj, Isfahan, Shiraz, Ahvaz, Dezful, Izeh, and Khorramabad.





Among those arrested in December were **Milad Goodarzi** and Alireza Nourmohammadi, who had only been released from prison in March, and **Esmaeil Narimanpour**, who was one of 10 Christian converts **forced to attend religious “re-education” sessions** in 2022 following a previous arrest. A Christian convert from Afghanistan was also **arrested**, leading to fears he may be deported.

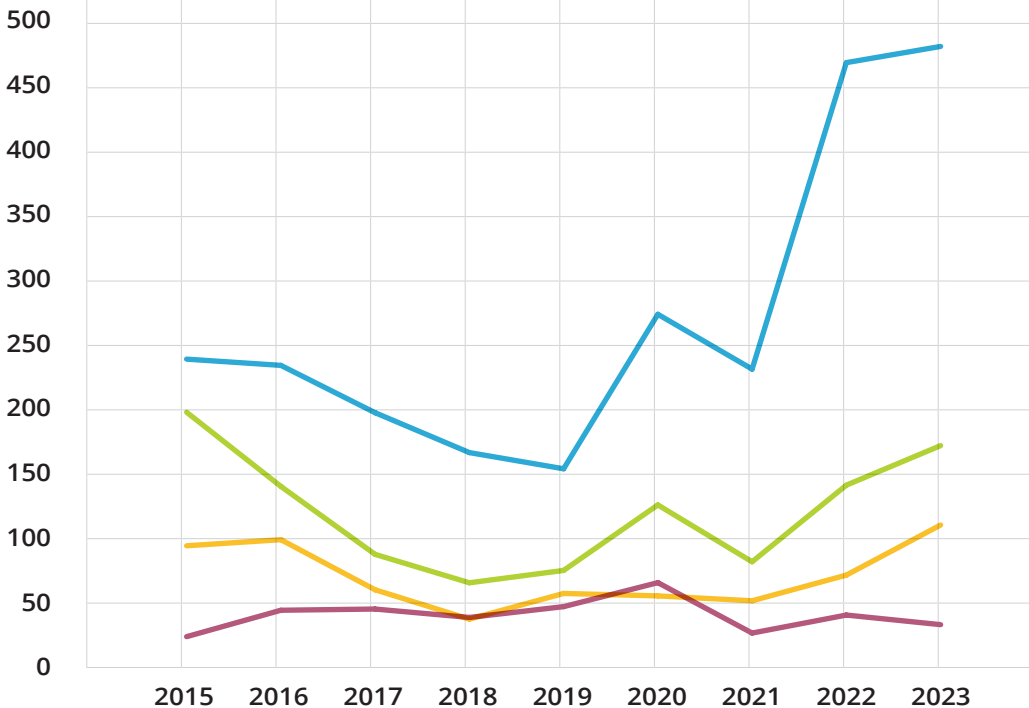


In three other unpublicised cases in 2023, three members of one family – a husband, wife and son – were sentenced to a combined nine years in prison for “establishing and leading a house-church”; a Christian woman, Aida N, who was sentenced to six months in prison in 2022 under the amended Article 500 for “propaganda against the state through promoting evangelical Christianity”, served two months in prison in mid-2023, before being granted conditional release; and two sisters who were forced to undergo religious “re-education” sessions in 2023 reported that they had been told during these sessions that they had been sentenced to seven years in prison.

It should also be noted that another individual, who must remain anonymous, spent the entirety of 2023 in prison following his arrest in December 2022. He had been charged with “propaganda against the state by promoting Christianity among Muslims”, and was unable to afford the bail subsequently demanded of him, which exceeded \$70,000.



Meanwhile, between May and October 2023, Christian converts Ahmad Sarparast, Morteza Mashoodkari, and Ayoob Poor-Rezazadeh, who were serving **five-year sentences** for spreading “deviant propaganda,” were **released** from Lakan Prison in Rasht, but ordered to report back daily for the remainder of their sentences to work without pay at a factory adjacent to the prison.



ESCALATION OF RIGHTS VIOLATIONS 2015 - 2023

- Christians Arrested
- Christians Detained
- Christians Sentenced
- Individuals Affected
(Dependents directly affected by a Christian's detention)

TABLE OF PRISONERS

Table of Christians charged with offences related to their faith and detained or serving sentences of exile in Iran in 2023



NAME	LOCATION	DETENTION BEGAN	RELEASED	SENTENCE
Yousef Nadarkhani	Evin Prison, Tehran	July 2018	Feb 2023	10 years (reduced to 6) + 2 years' exile for "acting against national security" including "propagating house-churches" and "promoting 'Zionist' Christianity"
Zaman (Saheb) Fadaie	Evin Prison, Tehran	July 2018	Feb 2023	10 years (reduced to 6) + 2 years' exile for "acting against national security" including "propagating house-churches" and "promoting 'Zionist' Christianity" + 80 lashes for "drinking (Communion) wine"
Mehdi Akbari	Evin Prison, Tehran	June 2020	-	10 years for "acting against national security by forming a house-church"
Mehdi Rokhparvar	Evin Prison, Tehran	June 2020	Feb 2023	5 years for "acting against national security by forming a house-church"
Amin Khaki	Karaj Central Prison	Nov 2021	Mar 2023	5 years (reduced to 3) for "engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam"
Milad Goodarzi	Karaj Central Prison	Nov 2021	Mar 2023	5 years (reduced to 3) for "engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam"
Alireza Nourmohammadi	Karaj Central Prison	Nov 2021	Mar 2023	5 years (reduced to 3) for "engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam"

NAME	LOCATION	DETENTION BEGAN	RELEASED	SENTENCE
Abdolreza (Matthias) Ali-Haghnejad	Anzali & Minab Prison	Jan 2022	-	6 years for “acting against the security of the country by forming a group and propagating Christianity outside the church and in the house-church and giving information to the enemies of Islam.” Charges dropped in 2014 revived by judge in 2022.
Hadi (Moslem) Rahimi	Evin Prison, Tehran	Jan 2022	Feb 2023	4 years for “acting against national security by attending house-churches and spreading ‘Zionist’ Christianity”
Sasan Khosravi	Exile	Feb 2022	-	2 years’ exile for “propaganda against the regime”
Sakine (Mehri) Behjati	Lakan Prison, Rasht	Apr 2022	Mar 2023	2 years for “acting against national security by attending house-churches and spreading ‘Zionist’ Christianity”
Morteza Mashoodkari	Lakan Prison, Rasht	May 2022	May 2023	5 years (reduced to 2.5) for “engaging in propaganda and educational activities for deviant beliefs contrary to the holy Sharia”
Ayoob Poor-Rezazadeh	Lakan Prison, Rasht	May 2022	Oct 2023	5 years for “engaging in propaganda and educational activities for deviant beliefs contrary to the holy Sharia”
Ahmad Sarparast	Lakan Prison, Rasht	May 2022	Oct 2023	5 years for “engaging in propaganda and educational activities for deviant beliefs contrary to the holy Sharia”
Sara Ahmadi	Evin Prison, Tehran	Aug 2022	May 2023	11 years (reduced to 8) + 2-year travel ban + 2-year ban on membership of any group + 6 months’ community service for “organisation of an illegal group [house-church]”
Homayoun Zhavah	Evin Prison, Tehran	Aug 2022	May 2023	2 years + 2-year travel ban + 2-year ban on membership of any group + 6 months’ community service for “membership of an illegal organisation [house-church]”
Joseph Shahbazian	Evin Prison, Tehran	Aug 2022	Sep 2023	10 years + 2 years’ exile + 2-year travel ban + 2-year ban on membership of any group for “acting against national security through membership and leadership of Evangelical house-churches”
Malihe Nazari	Evin Prison, Tehran	Aug 2022	Apr 2023	6 years for “acting against national security through membership and leadership of Evangelical house-churches”
Anooshavan Avedian	Evin Prison, Tehran	Sep 2022	-	10 years for “propaganda contrary to and disturbing to the holy religion of Islam” and “membership and leadership of Evangelical house-churches”
Aida N	Lakan Prison, Rasht	Mar 2022	May 2023	“Propagating evangelical Christianity”
Anonymous	Karaj Central Prison	Dec 2022	-	“Propaganda against the state by promoting Christianity among Muslims”

JUDICIAL RULINGS AGAINST IRANIAN CHRISTIANS

166 
ARRESTED



103 
DETAINED



485 
INDIVIDUALS
AFFECTED



2023
JUDICIAL
RULINGS

522
MONTHS IN
PRISON SENTENCES



22 
SENTENCED



21 
IMPRISONED





“

There were usually three or four appeal hearings scheduled each year, and when they announced the date... you no longer had peace of mind, because you didn't know what would happen, ...You don't know when this game is over, that's the hard part. There is a saying in Persian: 'It's a game for a cat, but death for the mouse.'”



Rev. Victor Bet-Tamraz

CRIMINAL LAW PROVISIONS COMMONLY APPLIED TO CHRISTIANS

Christians are typically targeted under the following provisions of the Islamic Penal Code:

498

Anyone, with any ideology, who establishes or directs a group, society, or branch, inside or outside the country, with any name or title, that constitutes more than two individuals and aims to perturb the security of the country, if not considered as “*mohareb*”⁷, shall be sentenced to two to 10 years’ imprisonment.

499

Anyone who joins, as a member, any of the groups, societies, or branches aforementioned in Article 498, shall be sentenced to three months to five years’ imprisonment, unless it is proved that he had been unaware of its aims.

499
BIS

Anyone who insults Iranian ethnicities or divine religions or Islamic schools of thought recognised under the Constitution, in the real or virtual sphere, with the intent to cause violence or tensions in the society, shall be sentenced to up to five years’ imprisonment, or 10 years if they received financial or organisational help from outside the country.

500

Anyone who engages in any type of propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran or in support of opposition groups and associations, shall be sentenced to three months to one year of imprisonment.

500
BIS

Anyone who engages in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam, through mind-control or psychological indoctrination, or making false claims, shall be sentenced to up to five years’ imprisonment, or 10 years if they received financial or organisational help from outside the country.

513

Anyone who insults the sacred values of Islam or any of the Great Prophets or [12] Shi’ite Imams or the Holy Fatima [Muhammad’s daughter], if considered as “*Saab ul-nabi*” [defamation of the Prophet], shall be executed; otherwise, they shall be sentenced to one to five years’ imprisonment.

⁷ The Islamic Penal Code defines as *mohareb* “any person resorting to arms to cause terror, fear or breach public security and freedom will be considered as *mohareb* and to be ‘corrupt on the Earth’”.



TRENDS

1 WAVES OF ARRESTS

One notable trend in 2023 was how arrests of Christians came in waves, with just a handful of arrests reported prior to June, then over 100 within the next three months, before a further rash of arrests during Christmas. However, very few of those arrested agreed to publicise their cases, leading to an increasing number of faceless victims. A similarly targeted approach was **reported** by the Baha'i religious minority, and, as with the arrested Christians, in many cases these individuals were not named.

2 BIBLE DISTRIBUTORS TARGETED

It became more apparent in 2023 that the Iranian authorities specifically target those involved in Bible distribution, with over one-third of arrests targeting individuals in possession of multiple copies of the Christian holy book. It is not known what became of these confiscated books, but it has been **reported** on numerous occasions previously that confiscated Bibles were "destroyed".



3 PRESSURE AHEAD OF MAHSA AMINI ANNIVERSARY

The first surge of arrests of Christians in 2023 took place in the months leading up to the anniversary of the death of Mahsa (Zhin) Amini, as the authorities appeared to increase pressure on a number of groups in an attempt to prevent a new wave of protests. Several Christians had been arrested in 2022 for participating in protests, and in the summer of 2023, as well as the mass arrests, Christians with prior convictions were contacted individually, and in some cases summoned to meet with their former interrogators, and warned that new charges would be brought should they take part in any protests.

4 PARDONING OF PRISONERS

At least nine Christians were “pardoned” in 2023 – the majority as part of a wider pardoning of political prisoners in the spring – but, as mentioned earlier, the majority of these individuals had already served most of their sentences and were therefore already eligible for parole. Meanwhile, arrests and sentencing of Christians continued, while the **summoning** of one Iranian-Armenian pastor to serve his 10-year sentence on the same day another was released was viewed as a warning to recognised Christians that they must continue to refrain from preaching to converts. It should also be noted that those pardoned were first brought before a panel including agents of the Ministry of Intelligence, and pressured to apologise for their actions and to pledge to have no further involvement in Christian activities, or to recant their faith.

5 INCREASED ENFORCEMENT OF RELIGIOUS RE-EDUCATION

Many of the Christians arrested in 2023 reported being forced to attend Islamic re-education sessions, in what appears to be a growing trend. In one instance, two individuals who must remain anonymous reported that they had been threatened with seven-year sentences during these sessions, which appear to involve joint collaborations between the Ministry of Intelligence and Islamic seminaries, with those leading the “re-education” identifying themselves as “researchers” or “students”.

6 INCREASINGLY SOPHISTICATED MONITORING

The monitoring of Christians and other groups inside Iran appears to be becoming increasingly sophisticated, with increased digital surveillance as well as frequent reports of house-churches being infiltrated by Ministry of Intelligence spies. Arrested Christians commonly report being told that pressure on them will be removed if they agree to “collaborate” with their interrogators by becoming their spies.



HOW PRESSURES ON CHRISTIANS AND THEIR FAMILIES CONTINUE EVEN AFTER RELEASE

The release of a prisoner from arrest or imprisonment can sometimes be mistakenly viewed as the end of the ordeal for that person and their family. In reality, there are many ways in which the pressure on individuals and their families continues even after their release. This section summarises the primary examples.

A MONITORING AND HARASSMENT

Many Christians report that they continue to be monitored and harassed long after their release, and in many cases this monitoring goes beyond simple observation; Christians will receive distressing and disturbing telephone calls from their interrogator, which remind them of the psychological torture they experienced during their detention. Often, the Christians are also summoned back to see their interrogator and give an account of their activities following their release. Touraj Shirani's wife, Elaheh Kiani, in their [Witness Statement](#), explained: "After Touraj's release, they [intelligence agents] still followed us, and [our interrogator] regularly called our home from an unknown number. Every time he called, we trembled with fear and sadness. And he always asked the same questions, like: 'Have you been in contact with anyone?' And 'Which of the Christians have you seen?' He told us: 'We are watching you!' ... Keep yourselves to yourselves and don't cause trouble! If you want to go on living in this country, live your lives quietly!"

In many cases, Christians report that intelligence agents make it very obvious to them that they are being watched.

"A car was always in our street, and the driver kept talking to people on his walkie-talkie," Mr Shirani explained. "Whenever we went out, I glued a piece of thread behind our door, and every time we came back the thread had been broken, and the agents' shoe-prints were clearly visible, so it was obvious they had entered our home."

For other Christians, the monitoring can be more subtle, such as through continuous surveillance of online activities. Several Christians have testified that during their interrogations they were surprised to see piles of print-outs of personal emails or other telecommunications, which were later brought before the judge as evidence of their Christian activities.

Meanwhile, as already noted in this report, the sophisticated online and offline surveillance techniques of the Iranian authorities have been widely **documented**.

B DENIAL OF EMPLOYMENT OR EDUCATION

Many Christians have reported that they have been fired from their jobs following arrest, usually after their employers faced pressure from Ministry of Intelligence agents.

One example is **Peyman Kiani**, who was warned by his interrogator during his detention that he would lose his job, and after returning to work was told: "Unfortunately you can't continue with your work unless the Ministry of Intelligence agrees to it... [or] you renounce your faith." After refusing, Mr Kiani went back to see his interrogator to plead for his job to be reinstated, but his interrogator responded: "We can't allow sick people like you to work and prosper in the Islamic Republic of Iran!"

Other Christians are denied employment by virtue of their confiscated work equipment never being returned to them, while others have their work licenses revoked or new ones denied.

Denial of education following arrest is also common, such as in the case of Parsa Mostafaei, who testified in his **Witness Statement** in February 2023: "When I was in prison, the interrogator had told me: 'If you don't cooperate with us, all your work opportunities and even your university education in Iran will be over'... At that time, I was studying accounting at the Islamic Azad University of Qods City in Tehran. But due to the interference of the intelligence officials, unfortunately I wasn't allowed to pass the six credits required to receive my final degree."

C ADDITIONAL PUNISHMENTS AND 'RE-EDUCATION'

Revolutionary Court judges are increasingly adding additional punishments to maximum prison sentences, such as terms of exile, flogging, fines, travel bans, and deprivation of social rights, including membership of any group.

There has also been an increase in sentences of community service at institutions that are clearly intended by the judges to be demeaning – for example at organisations supporting those with mental illnesses or other disabilities, or being ordered to help with grave-digging or washing dead bodies before burial.

One example is Christian couple **Sara Ahmadi and Homayoun Zhavah**, who on top of their combined 13-year prison sentence, were banned from foreign travel or membership of any social or political group for two years after their release, and given six months' community service at a centre for the mentally disabled.

As mentioned previously, many Christian converts are also forced to undergo "re-education" sessions with Islamic clerics following their release, during which the converts are pressured to return to Islam.



One convert who endured such a session, Nima Rezaei, explained: “We talked with this theologian for a few hours, and it felt like the whole aim was to try to coax answers from us that would cause us further trouble if we were arrested. They filmed the whole meeting, so our conversations could be used as additional evidence on top of the pledge they had already made us sign, and so they could file a more serious case against us.”

Other Christians have testified that Islamic clerics were brought in to see them during their detention, such as Parham Mohammadpour, who **testified**: “During the fourth interrogation ... they brought an Islamic cleric to convert me to Islam. But at the end I told the Islamic cleric and interrogators: ‘Even if you cut me into pieces, I won’t abandon my faith in Jesus Christ’... But they forced me to sign a written commitment that I wouldn’t evangelise or attend house-church meetings.”

In some cases, family members of released Christians have also been forced to attend these sessions, such as in the case of **Hamed Ashouri**.

D NEW CHARGES OR REOPENED CASES

Many Christians face the threat of new charges should they continue their activities – and are made to sign pledges in this regard – while some Christians are repeatedly imprisoned or face new charges, perhaps most notably pastors **Matthias Ali-Haghnejad** and **Yousef Nadarkani**.

Legal proceedings against Pastor Nadarkhani began when he was **sentenced to death** for “apostasy” following his 2009 arrest. This sentence was later changed to a three-year prison term for “propaganda against the regime”. But though he was **released** from that prison sentence in 2012, Pastor Nadarkhani was re-arrested in 2016, and in 2017 sentenced to 10 years in prison for “forming a house church” and “promoting ‘Zionist’ Christianity”. And even after his latest release from prison in 2023, Pastor Nadarkhani was flogged and received contradictory reports regarding whether or not he still faced two years in exile.

Pastor Ali-Haghnejad’s first arrest, meanwhile, took place back in 2006. He was later among nine Christian converts **acquitted** by Iran’s Supreme Court in 2019 of **five-year prison sentences** for involvement in house-churches. But Pastor Ali-Haghnejad was **re-arrested** just two weeks after his release, and informed that a previous six-year prison sentence, which had been **overturned on appeal** back in 2014, had been reinstated.

Two others acquitted in 2019, Behnam Akhlaghi and Babak Hosseinzadeh, were also **re-arrested** just six weeks after their release, and handed new charges of “propaganda against the state”.

Even for those who are not re-arrested, the prospect of re-arrest remains very real, especially for those who, under duress, sign pledges to have no further involvement in Christian activities.

PRESSURE TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY

For many Christians, the pressure following their release is enough to force them to consider leaving the country, and sometimes they are also actively encouraged to do so by intelligence agents, usually after they have refused to return to Islam or to accept a job as a spy of the Ministry of Intelligence.

Female Christian convert Sahar Dashti, who helped with the Sunday school at her house-church, testified in her 2022 **Witness Statement** that her interrogator had told her: “You’re clearly very talented in your ability to attract children, teenagers and young people; you had a positive impact on them, worked very well with them. Come, work with us, and we’ll give you a high salary and you can attract and guide children towards Islam!”

Meanwhile, fellow Christian convert Iman Shahvari said in his 2022 **Witness Statement**: “People think the Ministry of Intelligence knows everything about our lives, but they don’t; they only pay spies and informants to spy and report information to them. They asked me to cooperate with them too, and said: ‘We can provide jobs for you, but you must stop doing these things!’ By making these promises, they wanted to bring me back to Islam.”

When Mr Shahvari refused, his interrogator told him: “You are poison to Iran! You are making a mistake staying in Iran and causing trouble for the Iranian people! If you stay in Iran, we’ll kill you secretly. It’s better for you to leave Iran after your release, and go to a Christian country!”

Similarly, Touraj Shirani said that after his release his interrogator “called me regularly and kept asking the same questions every time. Once, he tried to persuade me to leave Iran, and said: ‘Don’t you want to leave Iran? You are of no use to this country! The best thing is for you to leave Iran of your own volition.’”

ISOLATION

The ongoing pressure of intelligence agents often also has the impact of increasing a Christian’s sense of isolation, which further propels many to consider leaving Iran.

After their release from arrest or imprisonment, many Christians say they cut off contact with other Christians for fear of endangering them, while others testify that other Christians – or even non-Christian friends and relatives – are too scared to meet them.

Touraj Shirani explained: “Our relationships with our friends and relatives were greatly damaged [by my arrest]. Our relatives reduced their contact with us, and in some cases cut off all contact... We were also very upset that we couldn’t connect with other Christians because we were under surveillance.”

Ali Kazemian said in his **Witness Statement** that after his release “Unfortunately, our Christian friends didn’t contact [us]. They told us: ‘Because of what has happened to you, we can’t communicate with you.’ The resulting isolation and disconnection from other Christian believers, and not participating in church meetings, broke us, and made me feel very low.”

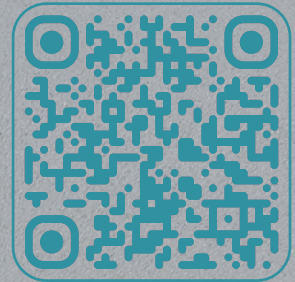
Some released Christians also face additional societal pressure, such as rejection from family members who had not previously been aware of their religious conversion.

STILL NO #PLACE2WORSHIP

On top of the other pressures, released Christians still have no clarity of where they can assemble for worship, free from fear of re-arrest, as they remain prohibited from attending Armenian and Assyrian churches, and cannot meet in house-churches, as these have been labelled “**enemy groups**” by current president Ebrahim Raisi.

Behnam Akhlaghi and Babak Hosseinzadeh inspired the **#Place2Worship** campaign by asking – while serving five-year prison sentences for their membership of house-churches – where they could worship once released and not face re-arrest, but the Iranian authorities have yet to provide an answer.

*All of these pressures make it increasingly difficult for Christians to remain in Iran, and many flee, only to find a new set of challenges awaiting them as refugees, as shown in our 2023 report on the **The Plight of Iranian Christians Claiming International Protection in Türkiye**.*



**SCAN ME
TO SEE THE REPORT**





RECOMMENDATIONS

To the government of Iran:



Ensure full enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief for every citizen, regardless of their ethnic or linguistic group, including converts from other religions, thereby amending Article 13 of the constitution in line with Article 18 of the ICCPR.



Release immediately and unconditionally Christians detained on charges related to their faith or religious activities.



Drop all charges against Christians related to church activities **deemed lawful** by the Iranian Supreme Court.



Cease the criminalisation of house-church organisation and membership, allowing Christians of all ethnic backgrounds to worship freely and collectively.



Return places of worship, and other properties and material confiscated from Christians and other religious minorities on “national security”-related charges.



Reopen churches closed on public health grounds during the Covid-19 pandemic, and all other churches forcibly closed for welcoming converts and holding services in the Persian language.



Clarify where Persian-speaking Christians may worship freely in their mother tongue, without fearing arrest and prosecution.



Cease using provisions such as Articles 498, 499, 500 and 513 of the Penal Code and Article 167 of the Iranian constitution to unjustly detain minority-faith adherents.



Guarantee access to legal counsel for all individuals charged with “national security”-related crimes and the right to select a lawyer of their choice, therefore repealing the Note to Article 48 of Iran’s Criminal Procedures Regulations.



Grant access to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, allowing him unhindered access to investigate the nation’s compliance with international human right law.



Cooperate fully with the **fact-finding mission** tasked by the UN Human Rights Council to investigate alleged human rights violations related to the 2022 protests.

To the International Community:



Hold Iran accountable for failures to fulfil its obligations under international law, including to ensure and facilitate freedom of religion or belief for all its citizens, highlighting human rights infractions during bilateral and multilateral dialogues with Iran.



Countries hosting Iranian Christians who have claimed asylum are encouraged to assess their cases with due diligence, recognising they have a well-founded fear of experiencing persecution if returned, as the Iranian regime continually harasses and pursues any individual identified as engaging in Christian activity.



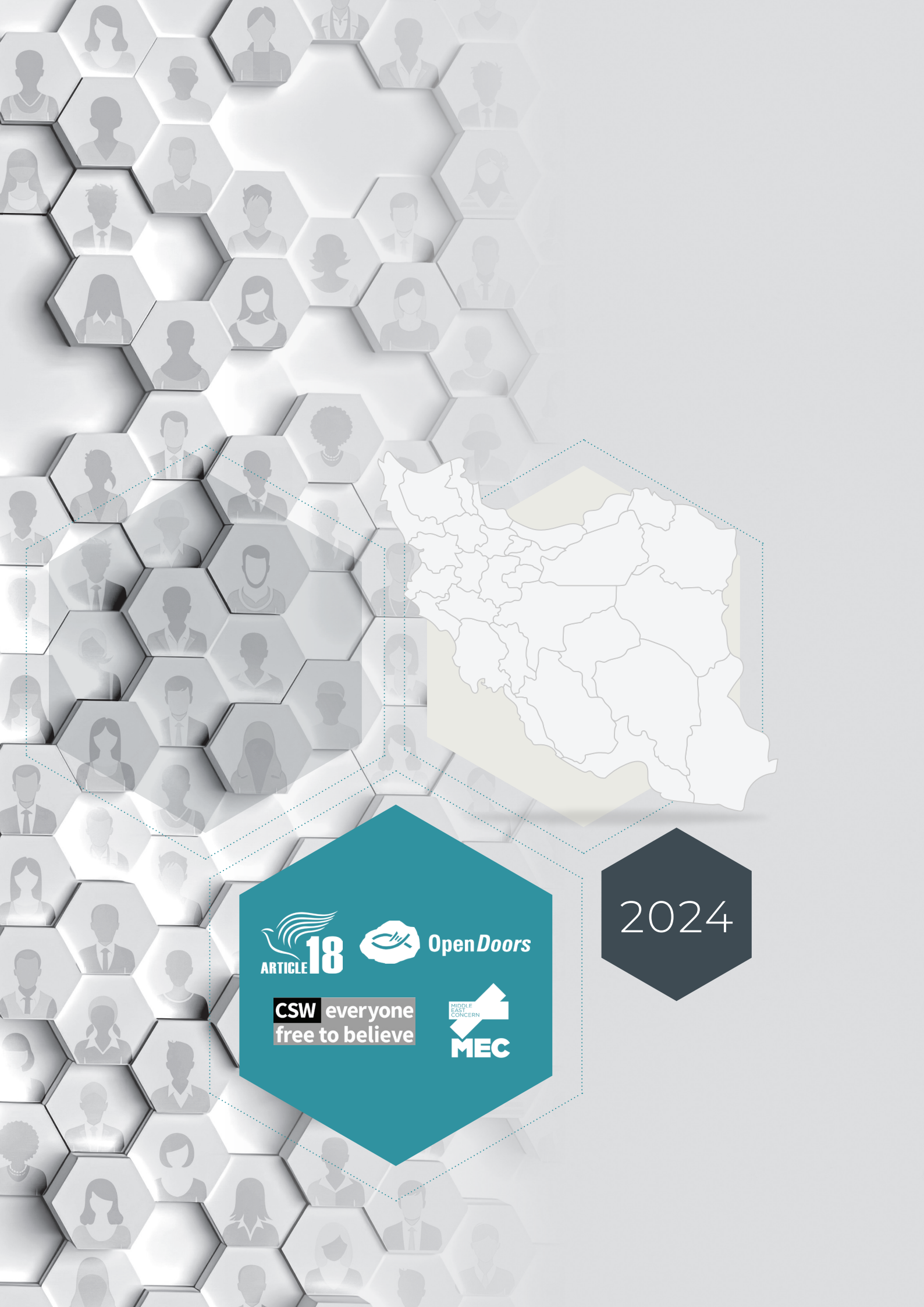
Refugee-receiving countries offering resettlement through the UNHCR or sponsorship programmes are urged to expedite resettlement for Iranian Christians currently resident in Turkiye, where there is a high risk of refoulement.

Finally, we thank the UN Secretary-General and UN Special Rapporteurs on human rights in Iran and freedom of religion or belief for raising awareness of the ongoing mistreatment of Christians and other religious minorities in Iran in their reports, and encourage continuing synergy on this issue between the different UN mechanisms and relevant special procedures.

*Central Assemblies of God Church in Tehran,
forcibly closed down in 2013.*



*Scan this QR code with your phone to access the digital version
of the report, which includes extra links to sources..*



2024

  **Open Doors**

CSW everyone free to believe 