### World Watch List 2018

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1 These countries reached a score of 43 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.
IRAN – Country Dossier (April 2018)

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Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). Further news and analysis is supplied by World Watch Monitor and WWR staff.

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1 See: https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/
2 WCD website: http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database
3 See: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/
**WWL 2018: Keys to understanding IRAN**

**Link for general background information:**

**Recent country history**

Recent history saw at least two remarkable developments on the political scene in Iran. In July 2015 an agreement was made between Iran and six world powers aiming to restrict the Iranian nuclear program—especially the enrichment of uranium—in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. According to The Economist, this development was a “major turning point for the economy and for Iran's engagement with the international system”. This deal was struck during the first term of President Rouhani, who is known as a moderate. The victories for the moderates in the elections to the Iranian Parliament and to the Assemblies of Experts in February 2016, as well as the re-election of President Rouhani in May 2017 seems to underline the rise of moderate politics in Iran.

However, in the elections for the head of the Iranian Assembly of Experts—the council responsible for selecting the highest authority of Iran, the Supreme Leader—an anti-Western hardliner was elected. This is a clear reminder that in the end—in spite of what seems to be a democratic process—it is the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who pulls the political strings in Iran.

The nuclear deal is likely to lead to a richer and stronger Iran, whose influence in the region will grow further. On a domestic level, the deal is not expected to lead to an improvement in terms of human rights in general or more specifically religious freedom. On the contrary, it could well lead to a stricter situation, as conservative elements of the Iranian political spectrum aim to suppress all elements that are considered a threat to the Islamic character of the regime. This includes Iranians with ties to the West but also religious minorities such as Christians and adherents of Bahai.

**The religious landscape**

Christianity is considered a condemnable Western influence and a constant threat to the Islamic identity of the Republic. This is especially the case since Christian numbers are growing and allegedly even children of political and spiritual leaders are leaving Islam for Christianity. The number of Christians with a Muslim background continues to increase. As Farsi-speaking services are prohibited, most converts gather in informal house-church meetings or receive information on the Christian faith via media, such as satellite TV and websites.

In an effort to stop Western influence, the government has limited the speed of the internet and prohibited the possession of satellite dishes. They hinder the access to satellite broadcast channels and internet sites they disapprove of, including Christian media. Part of their goal is to slow down the growth of the Church and especially Christian sites focusing on
evangelization are blocked. Allegedly, several Christian websites that were blocked before were later permitted to continue if they monitored their visitors. Thus, those active in ministry among Muslims and also Muslims interested in Christianity run the risk of being questioned and/or arrested, especially after contacting the websites concerned.

Converts with a Muslim background constitute the largest group of Christians in the country and there are also many Iranians abroad who convert to Christianity. The second largest group are ethnic Christians: Armenians and Assyrians, the only Christians who are officially recognized by the Iranian government and protected by law but treated as second-class citizens.

Apart from Christians, the rights of other religious minorities like Jews, Bahai, Zoroastrians, Dervishes and Sunni Muslims are violated as well. Particularly religions that are not recognized in the Constitution, like Bahai, are affected.

The political landscape

During his reign (1941-1979), the Shah had started a program of modernization and Western influences entered the country. At the same time, all dissidents were heavily oppressed. As a result, the Shah lost the support of powerful religious, political and popular forces paving the way for a coup. In the Revolution of 1979 the Shah was removed and Iran was changed into an Islamic Republic. Shia Islamic clerics took political control, banning all Western (or Christian, which is virtually the same in their view) influence from the country. Today, they are headed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In the view of Iran’s current leaders, expanding the influence of Shia Islam in the Middle East is a means of continuing the revolution. Particularly in Iraq, Shia Islam has regained influence since the demise of Saddam Hussein. And since the rise of the Islamic State group (IS) in large parts of Iraq, Shiite (Iranian) militias have been fighting them on the ground, playing a significant role in the defeat of IS in the battle of Mosul in July 2017. Qassem Soleimani, Major-General of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) Qods Force, boasted in a speech on 3 July 2017 that Tehran’s influence in the Middle East has expanded “tens of times” as a result of the Syrian war. Thus Iran is enjoying greater influence as a regional power in the Middle East, contrary to the intentions of the United States.

The socio-economic landscape

Iran has profited from the lifting of the (economical) sanctions following the nuclear deal. Focus Economics reports that “the economy has found its sweet spot following the country’s reintegration into the global economy.” Both increased oil production as well as a strong private consumption have boosted the economy. But Iran’s economy is still struggling, especially because of a lack of institutional reform. According to the Economic Freedom Index,

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Footnotes:

“Iran’s intrusive state and institutional shortcomings continue to hold back more broadly based economic development.”
Focus Economics draws the same conclusion: “On the downside, investment activities declined sharply on the back of the enduring recession in the construction sector due to the government’s sloppy intervention in the market and eroded wages following years of high inflation. Moreover, unemployment remains stubbornly high among young people and women, posing one of the main challenges for newly-reelected President Hassan Rouhani.”

One of the major issues is the internal power play within the Iranian government, which makes it difficult to reform the economy. Article 44 of the Iranian Constitution prescribes “that all major industries should be government owned”. In May 2005, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei provided an important new interpretation of this article, allowing more privatization and a decrease of the state sector. Instead of private companies, the very conservative Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) used this opportunity to build its own in-state economic empire. As the IRGC is very well connected to the judiciary and other state branches, it has become almost impossible for moderate President Rouhani to carry out major reforms.

This internal battle within the Iranian state explains the concluding note of the Economic Freedom Index on Iran: “The private sector is largely marginalized by the restrictive regulatory environment and government inefficiency and mismanagement. Modest efforts to enhance the business climate have occasionally been undone to maintain the status quo. This repressive climate stifles innovation.”

Concluding remarks

The nuclear deal concluded with the six major world powers in mid-2015, is still very relevant for Iran. What the consequences of this deal will be in the long run, depends to a large degree on different actors within the Iranian political spectrum.

Conservative elements known as “Principalists” (such as the powerful military and security organization commissioned to protect the regime, Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps - IRGC) are not supportive of this agreement. Iranian leaders fear for their position and fear any violation of the values of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It is likely that they will try to counter this development by blocking any attempts to implement social and political reform.

Another way of getting the message across that the nuclear deal does not mean an end to the values of the revolution, is a crackdown on media, human rights and political activists. Already, the suppression on Iranians holding dual nationality and dissidents including religious minorities has increased. These groups are considered a threat to the Islamic character of the republic. The first because of their connections to foreign circles and businesses, and the latter because of their political or religious convictions. Part of this suppression is reflected in the

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7 Id.
increased number of arrests but also smear campaigns against religious minorities, especially Christians and Bahai.

When more interactions with the wider world become possible for the general public, the security services are likely to monitor these more intensively. As a result, religious minorities like Bahai and Christians are likely to be more closely watched with the authorities especially looking for any contact with Western co-religionists. Already, Christian Persian speaking media are reported to be under close observation. In a way, the nuclear deal has further escalated an internal political power-struggle in Iran. In this struggle, which is not expected to cease in the short run, the outcome of the presidential elections of May 2017 will also play an important role.

**WWL 2018: Church History and Facts**

*Source: WCD, May 2017*

**How many Christians?**

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*Source: Open Doors estimate for number of Christians 2017*

**How did Christians get there?**

According to Acts 2 in the New Testament, Iranians (Parthians, Medes and Elamites) were among the first believers in Jesus Christ. Early Christianity was strong in Iran, and in the first few centuries Christian missionaries were sent out from the country. However, after the arrival of Islam in the 7th century Christianity declined. Protestant missionaries travelled to Iran in the 18th and 19th centuries which eventually led to the establishment of several Christian denominations.

**What church networks exist today?**

(Data only for ‘Orthodox’ supplied here)

10 Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelicals: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalists: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.
Communities of expatriate Christians:
Christian expatriates from the Far East (e.g. Philippines, South Korea) and the West, many have a Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian background. Some expatriate churches have been forced to shut down after local Christians with a Muslim background started attending. Joint annual prayer meetings between church leaders of different denominations have also been cancelled due to pressure from Iran’s security apparatus.

Historical Christian communities:
Historical ethnic Christian minorities such as the Armenian and Assyrian Christians are allowed to preach to fellow countrymen in their own language, but it is forbidden to minister to people with a Muslim background (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services. Although formally recognized and protected by law, they are treated as second-class citizens and have reported imprisonment, physical abuse, harassment and discrimination when reaching out to Muslims.

Communities of converts to Christianity:
Communities of converts to Christianity from a Muslim background are the largest group in Iran and experience the most persecution. These converts are considered apostates: Though not carried out officially for more than 20 years, conversion from Islam carries the death penalty for men, and life-long imprisonment for women in Iran.

Non-traditional Christian communities:
Christians from Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal communities, especially those who evangelize Muslims (or who are considered by the state to be Muslims, i.e. second generation converts) are the second main group experiencing persecution. Non-traditional Christians often have an Armenian, Assyrian or Muslim background. Others are second or third generation converts (i.e. their parents or grandparents had a Muslim background).

Religious context (selection)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Ethno-religionist</th>
<th>Jewish</th>
<th>Bahai</th>
<th>Atheist &amp; others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>800,000</td>
<td>80,021,000</td>
<td>37,100</td>
<td>480</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19,900</td>
<td>232,000</td>
<td>249,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also to note: Zoroastrian 68,700

Notes on the current situation

- Christians are forbidden to share their faith with non-Christians. Muslims, who generally speak Farsi, are not supposed to visit church services. Church buildings have been closed by the authorities when Christians tried to reach out to Farsi speakers. Converts from Islam are considered apostate and do not enjoy religious legal protection under Iranian law. They are

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11 This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.
subject to the death penalty under Sharia law. They lose their right to inherit family possessions. They are still considered Muslim and are therefore obliged to follow Islamic education.

- Most Christians with a Muslim background are young converts in need of training, teaching and materials. They rely on Christian radio and TV programs, the internet and books in Farsi to grow spiritually. Their number is increasing rapidly. According to Mark Bradley, author of “Iran and Christianity”: “More Iranian Muslims have become Christians in the last 25 years than since the seventh century, when Islam first came to Iran.”

- Christians often have difficulty in finding and keeping a job. Those who start a business of their own have problems gaining and keeping clients or customers. It is often hard for them to earn a steady income.

**WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile**

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

**WWL 2018** Points: 85 / Position: 10

**WWL 2017** Points: 85 / Position: 8

**WWL 2016** Points: 83 / Position: 9

**Where persecution comes from**

In contrast to the neighboring Arab countries in the Persian Gulf, the main threat for Christians comes from the government in Iran. The Iranian regime defines Iran as an Islamic State based on Shia Islam and they actively try to expand the influence of Shia Islam. Christians and other minorities are seen as a serious threat.

Although some reports mention pressure from families and communities on converts from Islam to Christianity, Iranian society is much less fanatic than their leadership. This is partly the result of the widespread influence of more moderate and mystical Sufi Islam, as well as the pride of the Iranian people about the pre-Islamic Persian culture.

**How Christians are suffering**

The hardliners within the Iranian leadership are very much anti-Christian and are creating severe problems for all Christian groups within Iran, but especially for communities of converts from Islam. The government presents the historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians as the ‘true and traditional Christianity’, but this is just window-dressing in order to be able to declare other Christians, especially converts, as not being real Christians. The historical communities are allowed to preach to fellow countrymen in their own language, but
it is forbidden to minister to people with a Muslim background (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services. Although formally recognized and protected by law, they are treated as second-class citizens and have reported imprisonment, physical abuse, harassment and discrimination when reaching out to Muslims.

Another group consists of Christian expatriates from the Far East (e.g. Philippines, South Korea) and the West, of whom many have a Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian background. Some expatriate churches have been forced to shut down after local converts with an Islamic background started attending. Joint annual prayer meetings between church leaders of different denominations were also cancelled in the past due to pressure from Iran’s security apparatus.

Converts from Islam to Christianity constitute probably the biggest group. They bear the brunt of persecution, especially by the government and to a lesser extent by their (extended) families and society.

In contrast to the historical churches, the government sees them as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran. Baptism is seen as a public declaration of one’s conversion to Christianity and thus as a definitive denunciation of Islam; it is therefore forbidden. Also, the majority of children born to converts are automatically registered as Muslims. Leaders of Christian convert groups have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison sentences for ‘crimes against the national security’; since 2014 an increasing number of non-leaders have also received similar punishment. Due to such high pressure, converts have to be very careful and many of them practice their faith isolated from other Christians. There is also a growing community of Iranian Christian converts worldwide, as many converts have fled the country over the years and other Iranians became Christians abroad.

There is another group of Christians made up of Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal communities, although it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between them and the communities of converts. These Christians often have an Armenian, Assyrian, Jewish or a Zoroastrian background. Others include the children and grandchildren of converts from Islam. They face the same severe persecution from the government and are discriminated by society, especially if they engage in any evangelistic of house-church activities.

Examples:

- Over the WWL 2018 reporting period, there were at least 52 arrests. Many Christians (especially converts) have been prosecuted and sentenced to long terms in jail. Others are still awaiting trial. Their families face public humiliation during this time.
- Several house-churches were raided in the WWL 2018 reporting period. Most of these are not functioning as house churches anymore.

A report came from the southeastern region that a convert was beaten by his cousin for his faith in Christ. Another had to abandon payment for his work, when his clients threatened to report his conversion to the government. There are probably many more examples of this kind of persecution happening, but many incidents are not being reported to avoid repercussions.

Christian leaders from non-convert communities are sometimes forced to report to the government about the members of their congregations.

**WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics**

*Reporting period: 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017*

**WWL 2018 Points: 85 / Position: 10**

**WWL 2017 Points: 85 / Position: 8**

**WWL 2016 Points: 83 / Position: 9**

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### Position on World Watch List (WWL)

Iran remains in the Top Ten of WWL 2018 with no change to the scored level of persecution compared to WWL 2017. The Iranian government continues to crack down on Christian convert communities in its goal of creating an Islamic state based on Shia Islam, in continuation of the Islamic Revolution\(^\text{14}\) of 1979. It is actively trying to expand the influence of Shia Islam in the region and utilizes international diplomacy, economic incentives, and even military intervention to achieve this. The use of violence, even against their own nationals,\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) Calling the Iranian Revolution of 1979 the “Islamic Revolution” can be misleading. Although it fits very well with the regime’s narrative of the events, it was not just people with an Islamic (Shiite) agenda who were involved in the coup against the Shah. Communists, for example, played a role as well. After the Revolution, other groups have been sidelined and saw many of their members killed by the new regime.
combined with this strong ideology creates a totalitarian state. Christians (with their perceived Western influence) and other minorities are seen as a serious threat to national security and are hence targeted by the government.

Persecution engines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persecution engines in Iran</th>
<th>Level of influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Islamic oppression</td>
<td>Very strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious nationalism</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic antagonism</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denominational protectionism</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist and post-Communist oppression</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular intolerance</td>
<td>Very weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictatorial paranoia</td>
<td>Very strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized corruption and crime</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Islamic oppression (Very strong):**
Shia Islam is the official state religion and all laws must be consistent with the official interpretation of Sharia law. The constitution bans the parliament from passing laws contrary to Islam and states 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 Jafari Islam as the official religion. To safeguard Islamic ordinances and to ensure the compatibility with Islam of legislation passed by the parliament, a Guardian Council consisting of Shia scholars and clerics must review and approve all legislation. The Guardian Council also reviews all candidates for the highest public appointments, like the presidency and the parliament. This explains why even the 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.

**Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):**
The zeal to maintain power is blended with Islamic oppression. The Islamic regime aims to protect the values of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 above all. Christianity is considered a condemnable Western influence and a constant threat to the Islamic identity of the Republic. Only the historical communities of Armenians and Assyrians are seen as Christian by the regime, although they are treated as second class citizens as well. Any other form of Christianity is treated as a dangerous Western influence, which explains why many Christians, especially converts from Islam to Christianity, are convicted for crimes against national security.

**Religious nationalism (Strong):**
This engine is strong within the Iranian government. In their view, ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim, and therefore ethnic Persian Christians are considered apostates. This

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15 The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.
makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially when it occurs in the Persian language - be it evangelism, Bible training, publishing Christian books or preaching in Persian. Iranian society is much less fanatic than its leadership. This is partly the result of the widespread influence of more moderate and mystical Sufi Islam, as well as the pride of the Iranian people about the pre-Islamic Persian culture.

**Organized corruption and crime (Strong):**
Imprisoned Christians – especially converts – are sometimes offered to be released on bail. This often involves large amounts of money – reportedly varying between 2,000 and 200,000 USD, forcing the Christians or their families to hand over title deeds of homes and sometimes businesses. Persons released on bail do not always know how long their property will be retained. This uncertainty can silence them due to fear of losing their families’ property. The Iranian regime puts pressure (sometimes with threats) on active Christians who were arrested for their house-church or evangelistic activities to leave the country and hence forfeit their bail.

**Drivers of persecution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drivers of persecution in Iran</th>
<th>Level of influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government officials at any level from local to national</td>
<td>Very strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic group leaders</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national</td>
<td>Very strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent religious groups</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological pressure groups</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own (extended) family</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties at any level from local to national</td>
<td>Strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups</td>
<td>Very strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized crime cartels or networks</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Drivers of Islamic oppression:**
Government officials are responsible for the many arrests and sentencing of Christians, especially converts from Islam. Non-Christian religious leaders (e.g. local Muslim clerics) sometimes incite violence against minority groups. Although Iranian society is moderate compared to its leadership, families will often put pressure on family members converting from Islam to Christianity.

**Drivers of Religious nationalism:**
The current Iranian political spectrum is basically a division between the Islamic left (Reformists) and the Islamic right (Principlists)\(^\text{17}\). The Reformists dominate the parliament, the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Re-elected president Rouhani can also be seen as a Reformist.

However, the Principlists dominate the Guardian Council, which has the power to veto all legislation from the parliament. The appointments of the Guardian Council are controlled by the supreme leader of Iran (who has highest authority in the country) and is a Principlist himself. In this way, the moderate parliament of Iran does not have much power to bring change. As long as the right wing sees Iran as an Islamic country for Shiite Muslims, threatened by Western (Christian) countries and culture, Christians, especially converts, will be persecuted.

The Principlists strengthen their support base through the Revolutionary Guard’s volunteer militia, the Basij, for example. This a fanatical right wing paramilitary group that is well-known for its loyalty to the supreme leader. The militia has offices and bases all over the country, securing support for the Principlists and acting violently against all enemies of the state if called upon, including Christians.

**Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:**
State security services monitor all Christian groups closely, even the officially recognized historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians. Through this close monitoring and arrest of those involved in evangelization, the government applies pressure to ensure that no Christian is involved in proselytizing Muslims.

**Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:**
The government uses the bail-system in such a way that it is purposely impoverishing prosecuted Christians and encouraging them to leave the country (see above). It has been reported that some government officials use the system to enrich themselves.  

**Context**
Recent history saw at least two remarkable developments on the political scene in Iran. In July 2015 an agreement was made between Iran and six world powers aiming to restrict the Iranian nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. This deal was struck during the first term of President Rouhani, who is known as a moderate. The victories for the moderates in the elections to the Iranian Parliament and to the Assembly of Experts in February 2016, as well as the re-election of President Rouhani in May 2017 seems to underline the rise of moderate politics in Iran.

The nuclear deal is likely to lead to a richer and stronger Iran, whose influence in the region will grow further. On a domestic level, the deal is not expected to lead to an improvement in terms of human rights in general or more specifically religious freedom. On the contrary, it could well lead to a stricter situation, as conservative elements of the Iranian political spectrum aim to suppress all elements that are considered a threat to the Islamic character of

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19 The Assembly of Experts is the directly elected body that designates and dismisses the supreme leader. However, the supreme leader himself controls the nomination and appointment of its members.
IRAN – WWR Country Dossier – April 2018

the regime. This includes Iranians with ties to the West but also religious minorities such as Christians and adherents of Baha’i.

Furthermore, one of the major issues is the internal power play within the Iranian government, which makes it difficult to reform the economy. Article 44 of the Iranian Constitution prescribes “that all major industries should be government owned”. In May 2005, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei provided an important new interpretation of this article, allowing more privatization and a decrease of the state sector. Instead of private companies, the very conservative Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) used this opportunity to build its own in-state economic empire. As the IRGC is very well connected to the judiciary and other state branches, it has become almost impossible for moderate President Rouhani to carry out major reforms.

No Christian has been killed by the regime for many years, most probably out of fear of the ensuing international consequences. Many dissidents from other groups have been executed - mainly on charges of terrorism (instead of “apostasy”). Besides Christians, Bahai, Sunni, Sufi (Dervish) Muslims and other religious minorities, also ethnic minorities, like the Kurds, Baloch and Iranian Arabs face suspicion and persecution from the government.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:
This group consists of Christian expatriates from the Far East (e.g. Philippines, South Korea) and the West, of whom many have a Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian background. Some expatriate churches have been forced to shut down after local converts with an Islamic background started attending. Joint annual prayer meetings between church leaders of different denominations were also cancelled in the past due to pressure from Iran’s security apparatus.

Historical Christian communities:
Historical ethnic Christian minorities such as the Armenian and Assyrian Christians are relatively free to practice their belief. They are allowed to preach to fellow countrymen in their own language, but it is forbidden to minister to people with a Muslim background (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services. Although formally recognized and protected by law, they are treated as second-class citizens. Besides this, they will face imprisonment, physical abuse, harassment and discrimination when reaching out to Muslims.

Communities of converts to Christianity:
Converts from Islam to Christianity constitute probably the biggest group. They bear the brunt of persecution, especially by the government and to a lesser extent by their (extended) families and society. In contrast to the historical churches, the government sees them as an

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attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran. Baptism is seen as a public declaration of one’s conversion to Christianity and thus denunciation of Islam and is therefore forbidden. Also, the majority of children born to converts are automatically registered as Muslims. It is especially the leaders of Christian convert groups who have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison terms for crimes against the national security, although since 2014 an increasing number of non-leaders have received similar charges too. Due to such high pressure, converts have to be very careful and many of them practice their faith isolated from other Christians. There is also a growing community of Iranian Christian converts worldwide, as over the years many converts have fled the country and other Iranians have become Christians abroad.

Non-traditional Christian communities:
Although it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between this category and the communities of converts, there are Christians belonging to Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal communities. They often have an Armenian, Assyrian, Jewish or a Zoroastrian background. Others include the children and grandchildren of converts from Islam. They face the same severe persecution from the government and are discriminated against by society, especially if they engage in any evangelistic or house-church activities.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Iran shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Iran remained at the extreme level of 15 points, not changing in comparison to the WWL 2017 reporting period.

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• Pressure remained at an extreme level in all spheres of life but is strongest where Christian life becomes public: i.e. in the Church and National spheres. This indicates something of the difference between regime and society: the former being more radical than the nominal Iranian citizen is.
• The score for violence went down from 10.2 in WWL 2017 to 10.0. The Iranian government remains very oppressive and keeps detaining, sentencing and imprisoning many Christians, but in the WWL 2018 reporting period no incidents of forced marriage were officially reported. However, as one country researcher remarked: “This is so common that it is hardly reported as a persecution incident.”

Private sphere:
Converts from Islam to Christianity cannot openly practice their faith. Any hint that they may be Christians can have serious consequences. If they are the only believers in their family, they have to be very careful in the way they worship. For all types of Christianity, it can be dangerous to possess Christian materials in Persian (Farsi) – especially if it concerns significant quantities as this would suggest they are for distribution to Muslim background Iranians. Christians from Historic Christian communities can possess Christian materials in their language (Armenian or Assyrian) without fear.

Family sphere:
For a Muslim family, it is a great disgrace when one of its members leaves Islam. In the case of inheritances and custody of children in divorces, Christians are often discriminated against if family members are Muslims. For example, a non-Muslim cannot inherit from a Muslim. Besides this, a Muslim man is free to marry a non-Muslim woman. However, the opposite does not apply. A marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman is not even recognized. In addition, in school, children of Christians with a Muslim background are considered Muslims and are obliged to attend Islamic classes. In post-secondary education all Christians are forced to take Islamic courses.

Community sphere:
All Christians in Iran are more or less put under pressure to renounce their faith as a result of discrimination. Christians with a Muslim background are considered unclean especially in villages, rural areas and in conservative cities. Radical Islamic people will not shake hands with Christians, touch them or eat their food. All types of Christianity - and particularly converts if their new faith is known - can experience harassment and discrimination in their workplace, both by the state and by private sector employers.

National sphere:
Any Muslim who leaves Islam faces the death penalty. However, the only person who has been executed under apostasy laws was Rev. Hossein Soodmand in 1990. After that, there was international pressure on the regime and there were no further executions for apostasy. The regime’s focus is on those reaching out to converts and even well-established Christian denominations are not safe from harassment if they are active in ministering to Muslims: their
members are then questioned by the police, arrested, put in jail and beaten. Many (if not all) public church services are monitored by the secret police. Hate speech against Iranian Christians, especially Protestants, increased during the WWL 2018 reporting period in the form of multimedia material published by the government and anti-Christian rhetoric expressed by imams.

Church sphere:
The government has further intensified its campaign to remove Persian-speaking Christians from the country. During the past years, many churches have been shut down, confiscated or forced to cancel their church services in Persian. Their leaders were also often arrested. Congregations that are still gathering in churches are not allowed to accept new members with a Muslim background and their current members are aging. Severe surveillance on house-churches leads to increasing fear among those attending. Evangelism, Bible training and the publishing and importing of Bibles in Farsi are all illegal.

Violence:
During the WWL 2018 reporting period, most violence against Christians came from the government; at least 52 Christians were arrested. Especially converts from Islam to Christianity actively involved in the proselytization of Muslims endured the most persecution. Houses of (convert) Christians were raided and many converts received long prison sentences. The government also continued their policy of impoverishing imprisoned Christians by demanding unreasonably high bail amounts.

Gender profile of persecution

Female:
The Tahirih Justice Center reports that women and girls are especially vulnerable in the Iranian society because they are depending on their husbands and guardians. There is little protection against (sexual) abuse and domestic violence. Furthermore, the issue of honor and shame is an important element within Iranian society. Thus, a woman’s conversion and arrest is often more shameful to families than when male members leave Islam. Nonetheless, more women than men are converting to Christianity in Iran. The number of female Christian converts arrested and detained has risen ever since the state started targeting ordinary church members and not just leaders. However, the number of detentions are lower than for men. One reason could be that issuing prison sentences to women can have negative international consequences for the Iranian regime, since people tend to have more sympathy for female detainees.

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22 For example: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/11/iran-christian-convert-loses-appeal-10-year-sentence-missionary-activities/, last accessed 1 December 2017. For more examples, see: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iran/

23 For example: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/iranian-christian-convert-released-bail-days-threat-indefinite-incarceration/, last accessed 1 December 2017. For more examples, see: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iran/

Male:
In the WWL 2018 reporting period, more men were arrested, prosecuted and sentenced by the government than women. Men tend to have more leadership positions within the various (underground) churches, although sources say house-churches are often lead by women too.

Future outlook

The conservative elements known as Principalists within the Iranian government (see above) fear for their position and fear any violation of the values of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It is likely that they will try to counter the current more moderate development by blocking any attempts to implement social and political reform. Another way of getting the message across that the nuclear deal does not mean an end to the values of the revolution, is a crackdown on media, human rights and political activists. Already, the suppression on Iranians holding dual nationality and dissidents including religious minorities has increased. These groups are considered a threat to the Islamic character of the republic. The first because of their connections to foreign circles and businesses, and the latter because of their political or religious convictions. Part of this suppression is reflected in the increased number of arrests but also smear campaigns against religious minorities, especially Christians and Baha’is.

When more interactions with the wider world become possible, security services are also likely to monitor these more intensively. As a result, religious minorities like Baha’is and Christians are likely to be more closely watched - especially for contacts with Western co-religionists. Already, Christian Persian speaking media are reported to be more closely watched. In a way, the nuclear deal has further escalated an internal political power-struggle in Iran. In this struggle, which is not expected to cease in the short run, the re-election of moderate president Rouhani in May 2017 over the very conservative candidate supported by the Supreme Leader seems to mean that the majority of the Iranian society is supporting the ‘reformists’

Because of the huge power base of the Principalists, like the powerful military and security organization commissioned to protect the regime, Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps – IRGC and their connections with the judiciary, the outcome of the internal power struggle is uncertain. Things are changing in Iran. At least on paper, such developments could have a positive outcome for Christians and other minorities in the long term, but for now persecution is at an extreme level.

Policy considerations

Open Doors recommends that:

- The international community, taking advantage of the improved diplomatic relations with the West, should urge the government of Iran to recognize all minority religions as full citizens before the law enjoying their full human rights including the ethnic Persian believers.
- The human rights situation should be addressed in the contact between Iran and Western countries, especially now more and more Western business are investing in
Iran, with a mainstreamed emphasis on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The increasing frequency of multimedia hate campaigns should be denounced and penalized.

- The international community should hold the Iranian government accountable to uphold these international and constitutional commitments to protect the freedom of Christians in its territories. Closing churches, appropriating church property, arresting church leaders and threatening churchgoers are violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief proscribed in Article 18 of the ICCPR, to which Iran is a signatory. Article 13 of Iran’s Constitution says Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are recognized religious minorities free to perform religious rites and ceremonies. Article 23 of Iran’s Constitution says: "investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief."

- At least 52 Christians were arrested in the WWL 2018 reporting period, many have been imprisoned and faced physical and psychological torture during interrogation. The international community should press for the immediate release of the prisoners and legal justice for violence committed in prisons.

WWR in-depth reports

There are currently no in-depth reports on Iran available at: http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/ (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Iran available at: http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/ (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iran/

- Iran: do non-Muslims have the right to hold elected public office or not? 20 April 2018

In Iran, which is 90-95 per cent Shia Muslim, the passing of a date set for a decision over whether a non-Muslim can hold an elected public office is significant for the country’s religious minorities and their rights. The date, April 5, passed without that decision being made.
• **Iranian Christian arrested 45 days ago tells family: ‘I’m in Evin Prison’**  
16 April 2018  
An Iranian Christian convert, about whom nothing had been heard since his arrest 45 days ago, was able to contact his family over the weekend to let them know he is being held in the notorious Evin Prison, in the capital Tehran.

• **Iran: Christian retreat centre ordered to close by tomorrow**  
9 March 2018  
A Christian retreat centre in Iran will finally close on 10 March 2018, nearly three years after it was ordered to do so and then later accused of being funded by the USA’s “CIA spy agency”.

• **Iran: Christians held in notorious Evin Prison ‘will never be the same’**  
28 February 2018  
There was hope among Iranian Christians that the mass protests earlier this year could effect change for them, but they continue to be harassed and imprisoned on spurious charges.

• **Iranian Christian convert detained since before Christmas**  
16 February 2018  
An Iranian convert to Christianity arrested more than two months ago remains in prison in the conservative north-western city of Tabriz, according to rights group Article 18. Ali Amini, known by his friends as Philip, was arrested by revolutionary guards at his workshop in the city on 10 December 2017.

• **Iran protests saw people ‘turn their backs on political Islam’**  
25 January 2018  
Iranians are challenging the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic because corruption and inequality undermine its ideals, a human rights activist has claimed.

• **Iranian Christmas: Inconspicuous decorations ... then celebrating behind bars**  
27 December 2017  
An Iranian Christian who spent three years – and three Christmases – in prison describes his experience of Christmas in Iran.

• **Iran: Christian convert loses appeal against 10-year sentence for ‘missionary activities’**  
24 November 2017  
An Iranian convert to Christianity has had his 10-year prison sentence upheld after losing his appeal. Naser Navard Gol-Tappeh was sentenced in May alongside three Azerbaijanis. All four men were given 10-year sentences for “missionary activities” and “actions against national security” in Iran.
• **Iran MPs want to change law so people can only vote for candidates from their own religion**
   3 November 2017
   Conservative MPs within Iran’s parliament are proposing that Iranians should only be allowed to vote for members of their own religious group. In Iran, where 90-95% of the population is Shia Muslim, this will essentially mean that it will be impossible for members of religious minorities to be elected.

• **Iran’s Revolutionary Guard confiscates Christian literature as ‘publicity stunt’**
   26 September 2017
   Photographs released by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard showing large quantities of confiscated Christian materials were a “publicity stunt” that reflected the Iranian regime’s fear of Christianity, says religious freedom advocate.

• **Iranian Christian Maryam Naghash Zargaran released after four years in prison**
   2 August 2017
   After four years’ imprisonment for “violating national security”, Iranian Christian Maryam Naghash Zargaran was released from Tehran’s Evin prison on 1 August 2017.

• **Iranian Christian out on bail after 3-week hunger strike**
   27 July 2017
   An Iranian Christian sentenced to 15 years in jail has been released on bail, three weeks after writing an open letter to the authorities, asking what he had done to “make you hate me this much” and declaring that he had decided to “terminate my life slowly” through a hunger strike.

• **Jailed Christian on hunger strike to protest against treatment of Iranian converts**
   21 July 2017
   Another imprisoned Iranian Christian has begun a hunger strike to protest against the recent rash of sentences against Christians in Iran - Ebrahim Firouzi, 30, who has five years left of his own sentence for “acting against national security”.

• **New Anglican bishop tells of Iranian persecution and exile**
   18 July 2017
   Firsthand experience of persecution has returned to the top levels of the Church of England with the appointment of a bishop whose brother was murdered and whose parents were attacked in their bed during the Iranian Revolution.

• **Rash of sentences ‘shows government’s fear of growth of Christianity in Iran’**
   12 July 2017
   Four more Christians received lengthy jail sentences in Iran last week, it has emerged, taking the total number sentenced in the last month to 12.
• **Jailed Iranian Christian asks authorities: ‘Why do you hate me?’**
  11 July 2017
  An Iranian convert to Christianity, sentenced last week to 15 years in jail, has written an open letter to the authorities, asking what he has done to “make you hate me this much” and declaring that he has decided to “terminate my life slowly” through a hunger strike.

• **Third Iranian convert given lengthy sentence alongside pastor**
  7 July 2017
  More details have emerged about the sentencing of four Iranian Christians earlier this week.

• **Iran sentences four more Christians to 10 years in jail for ‘missionary activities’**
  6 July 2017
  One Iranian and three Azerbaijani Christians have been found guilty of “missionary activities” and “actions against national security” in Iran and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

• **As ‘Free Iran’ movement gathers in Paris, young Iranian Christians share challenges**
  30 June 2017
  Over 90 European and US faith leaders have signed a petition urging Western governments to make the plight of religious minorities central to any deal with Iran.

• **Why Iranian Christians are pinning hopes on ‘moderate’ Rouhani, despite human rights failures**
  19 May 2017
  As Iranians head to the polls today (19 May) to vote for their next President, World Watch Monitor takes a look at President Hassan Rouhani’s first term in office and the potential impact of the election result for the country’s Christian minority.

• **Iranian converts: one needs urgent care, another denied chance to see mum with cancer**
  27 March 2017
  The health of Iranian Christian convert, Maryam Naghash Zargaran, continues to decline, sources told Mohabat News. It was reported that over the past week her condition worsened and she is again in need of urgent medical care.

• **Iran’s hidden Christians are becoming visible in the migrant camps of Europe**
  15 March 2017
  A pastor in northern France has described her church’s ministry to Middle Eastern migrants in a nearby camp as “the mission field coming to you”. The church’s leader, Pastor Lydie Granger, said that among the estimated 1,400 migrants living in the camp outside Dunkirk were around 40 Iranians.
• **Iranians end hunger strike**
  17 February 2017
  UPDATE: Two imprisoned Iranian Christians have ended their hunger strike after being promised medical care and progress in their case.

• **Women ‘central’ to spread of Christianity in Iran**
  20 January 2017
  Women are playing a central role in the underground churches of Iran despite the risk of rejection by their families and imprisonment by police, research by the global charity Open Doors has found.

• **Another court hearing, but no end in sight for Iranian Christian converts**
  14 December 2016
  A second court hearing took place today (14 Dec.) for four Iranian converts to Christianity charged with “acting against national security”. Youcef Nadarkhani, Yasser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie and Mohammad Reza Omidi were initially arrested on 13 May.

• **Iran: church retreat centre confiscated for ‘being funded by CIA’**
  12 December 2016
  The Iranian government has assumed control of a church-owned retreat centre, accusing the church of being funded by the US government and the CIA. The government said the retreat centre in Karaj, a city just west of Tehran, belonged to an organisation “funded by the US.

• **Iranian rights groups decry treatment of Christians**
  30 November 2016
  Iranian and European human rights and religious rights organisations have urged the international community to use new opportunities for trade with Iran to hold the government there to account over its treatment of Christian converts.

• **‘So afraid I almost fainted’ – Iran Christian on brother’s arrest**
  11 November 2016
  It was just another day at the office for accountant Sepideh*. The phone rang and Sepideh reached over her desk to answer it, not knowing that this call would be the start of years of worries.

• **Bishop’s wife saved husband from Iranian extremists, but lost her only son**
  11 November 2016
  Margaret and her husband, the Bishop of Iran, lost their son in 1980 during the anti-Christian hostility of Iran’s Islamic Revolution.
UPDATE: Iran allows Azerbaijani Christians home on ‘conditional’ release
8 November 2016
Three Azerbaijani Christians, accused by Iran of “missionary activities”, were allowed to go home on 6 November 2016, after more than four months in prison.

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Iran (password: freedom).

- **Iran: Eight Christians sentenced**
  11 August 2017
  According to Mohabat News reporting on 11 July 2017, the Islamic Revolutionary Court has sentenced 8 Christian men.

- **Iran: New Human Rights Watch report denounces treatment of converts**
  23 February 2017

- **Iran: Death of Rafsanjani strengthens position of Islamic hardliners**
  9 February 2017
  The death of former Iranian president, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, on Sunday 8 January 2017, is likely to lead to increased power for Islamic hardliners.

- **Iran/Cuba: Religious freedom for Iranian Shiite missionaries, but not for Christians**
  7 November 2016
  Cuba is the most recent and unlikely addition to Iran’s growing network of missionary centers.