

COUNTRY PROFILE

IRAN



A “sharp” deterioration in the rights of Christians and other minorities was observed in 2022¹⁰⁴ and conditions “remained extremely poor” the following year.¹⁰⁵ Cases of Christians detained in Iran rose from 59 in 2021 to 134 the following year and then to 166 in 2023.¹⁰⁶ Authorities increasingly targeted people for distributing Bibles, with more than “one-third” of arrests involving people caught with multiple copies of the sacred text.¹⁰⁷ Many suffered physical or mental abuse, including psychological torture.¹⁰⁸

This crackdown came after unprecedented protests erupted in autumn 2022 following the death in suspicious circumstances of Iranian woman Mahsa Amini. The 22-year-old Muslim was under arrest for allegedly “violating rules” requiring women to wear headscarves.¹⁰⁹ The government had begun to implement 2021 amendments to Articles 499 and 500 of the penal code introducing prison sentences for those guilty of “insulting Islam” and undertaking “deviant activity” seen as flouting Islamic law.¹¹⁰

The state officially recognises Christian communities, including Roman Catholics, and some Orthodox and Protestant denominations but they are banned from reading the Bible in the national language Farsi. Contact with Christian converts from Islam may result in imprisonment.¹¹¹

Christian converts from Islam are among the most targeted groups in the country. They are perceived as colluding with the West, accused of undermining Iran’s Islamic regime. Converts may number between 800,000¹¹² and 1.2 million.¹¹³ Increasingly they live underground.¹¹⁴ Evangelisation remains illegal. Iranian house churches have spread “because of church closures and a lack of state licences to build new churches or because access to official churches has been restricted to Armenian and Assyrian Christians.”¹¹⁵

SELECTED INCIDENTS

AUGUST 2022 The Court of Appeals in Tehran Province confirmed the convictions of three Christian converts, Jozef Shahbazian, Somayeh Sadegh and Mina Khajavi. They had been fined and sentenced to a combined 16 years in jail.¹¹⁶

DECEMBER 2023 Christian convert Esmaeil Narimanpour was arrested on Christmas Eve at his home in Dezful, western Iran. His Christian books were confiscated. Mr Narimanpour, who had previously been forced to attend ‘re-education’ sessions with an Islamic cleric, was able to call his family briefly on Christmas Day to say he was being held in Ahvaz, about 95 miles (150km) south of Dezful. When his wife and brother followed up the case, they were questioned and detained for several hours.¹¹⁷

MARCH 2024 Iranian woman Laleh Saati, 45, who converted from Islam to Christianity while in Malaysia, returned home only to be jailed for two years for acting “against national security”. Ms Laleh, who went back to Iran in 2017 to be reunited with her elderly parents, was repeatedly questioned by intelligence agents over several years before being arrested in February 2024 at her father’s home in a Teheran suburb. After three weeks of interrogations, she appeared before the Revolutionary Court in Teheran.¹¹⁸

APRIL 2024 Christian prisoner of conscience Mina Khajavi was reportedly prevented from accessing medical care while inside Tehran’s Evin Prison. The Christian convert, who has arthritis, is serving a six-year sentence for leading a house church.¹¹⁹