

World Watch Research

Iran:

Background Information

September 2024



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Iran: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
89,810,000	800,000	OD estimate

Recent history

In the Revolution of 1979, the Shah was removed from power and Iran was changed into an Islamic Republic. During his reign (1941-1979), the Shah had introduced a program of modernization and allowed Western influences to develop in the country. At the same time, all dissidents were heavily oppressed by his US-trained and supported secret service, which had been in place since the USA and United Kingdom initiated a coup which toppled Iran's democratically elected government in 1953. As a result, the Shah lost the support of powerful religious, political and popular forces, paving the way for another coup. In 1979, Shia Islamic clerics took political control, banning from the country all

Western influence (or Christian influence, which they perceive as being virtually identical). Today, the most senior and influential cleric is currently the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In July 2015 an agreement between Iran and six world powers aiming to restrict the Iranian nuclear program was made in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. President Rouhani, known to be a moderate, struck this deal in his first term and was re-elected in May 2017. In February 2016, moderates won in the parliamentary elections and this seemed to confirm the rise of moderate politics in Iran. However, the February 2020 parliamentary elections saw the hardliners win a landslide victory after the very conservative Guardian Council rejected the candidacy of thousands of mostly moderate and reformist candidates - including 90 sitting members of parliament ([AP News, 14 January 2020](#)). This scenario was repeated during the March 2024 parliamentary elections - with the hardliners further tightening their grip on power, but with the lowest voter turnout (41%) since the Iranian revolution ([Crisis Group, 12 March 2024](#)).

Similarly, the presidential elections in June 2021 were won by the former head of the judiciary and hardliner, Ebrahim Raisi, a confidant of the Supreme Leader rumored to become his successor, in a seemingly engineered election process in which only 7 of the almost 600 candidates were approved by the Guardian Council ([BBC News, 19 June 2021](#)). Raisi's presidency ended abruptly though, after he was killed in a helicopter crash. In a bid probably aimed at increasing voter turnout, low-profile Reformist Masoud Pezeshkian was allowed to run and subsequently won the presidential election, defeating five hardline opponents, showing that the Iranians are looking for political change ([Politico, 7 June 2024](#)). Pezeshkian vowed to improve the relationship with the West, but given the president's limited powers it is unlikely that he will be able to succeed ([CSIS, 9 July 2024](#)). This all shows 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 July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – which is popularly known as "The Iran Deal" – led to a more prosperous and confident Iran, whose influence in the region grew. However, in May 2018 the USA announced its withdrawal from the nuclear deal and reinstated its sanctions against Iran. As a result, the Iranian economy has been struggling ever since. The moderates, including former President Rouhani, tried to uphold the deal with the other signatories (mainly the EU, Germany, France and the UK). However, increasing tensions between Iran and the USA led to Iran breaching the terms of the agreement ([The Independent, 6 November 2019](#)). Tensions escalated further after the US embassy in Baghdad was partially set on fire by an Iraqi militia backed by Iran in December 2019. In January 2020, in an unexpected and major response which shocked the Iranian government, the USA assassinated Major General Qasem Soleimani, Iran's most influential military commander, a 'living martyr' of the Iran-Iraq war and public hero ([Al-Monitor, January 2020](#)).

While Iran continued to expand its nuclear facilities, newly elected US President Joe Biden indicated that he would like to revive the deal. However, both parties have been in stalemate ever since, as Iran first wants the sanctions to be lifted, while the USA first wants Iran to scale down its nuclear activities ([BBC News, 6 April 2021](#)). While negotiations for a new deal were ongoing, Iran further developed its nuclear capacities, even claiming it is now technically capable of building a nuclear bomb ([France24, 17 July 2022](#)). However, Iran's violent response to the protests following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, and its weapon deliveries to Russia in late 2022, threatened to freeze talks with the USA entirely ([The Guardian, 4 December 2022](#)). Nevertheless, during the first half of 2023, both

countries seemed to come to some sort of mutual understanding, in which Iran would halt proxy attacks on US troops in Iraq, return US prisoners and not further enrich uranium in return for US sanction relief ([Al-Monitor, 25 June 2023](#)). However, following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, attacks on US troops in Iraq have increased again. Some sanctions were nevertheless removed: The USA allowed Iran to sell electricity to Iraq, freeing roughly 10 billion frozen dollars in the process ([Tablet, 14 December 2023](#) / [AP News, 14 November 2023](#)). Earlier on, Iran and the USA reached an agreement in which five US prisoners were freed by Iran in exchange for the release of 6 billion dollars frozen in South Korean banks ([Reuters, 9 October 2023](#)). For more details, see below: *Security situation*.

The weapon deliveries to Russia in late 2022 followed a strengthening of ties between Iran and Russia, after Russia became an international pariah following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. President Putin visited the country in July 2022 and received strong support for the invasion from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ([The Arab Weekly, 20 July 2022](#)). Russia bought drones from Iran, while Russia's national oil and gas company Gazprom signed deals with its Iranian counterpart potentially worth \$40 billion ([ECFR, 20 July 2022](#), [Reuters, 19 July 2022](#)).

In a sudden move in March 2023, China brokered a deal between Iran and Saudi-Arabia, with the adversaries re-opening their embassies ([Al-Monitor, 10 March 2023](#)). Although this apparent thawing of relations will most likely decrease regional tensions - remembering that both countries support different warring groups in Yemen - it may bring very few results as both parties remain determined to strive for regional power ([Al-Monitor, 13 March 2023](#)).

Protests

Ten years after the Green Movement protests ([BBC News, 28 December 2009](#)), the deteriorating economic situation and oppression of dissidents (including female activists) ([BBC News, 11 March 2019](#)), led to weeks of bloody protests in November and December 2019. It is believed that around 1,500 civilians were killed during the demonstrations ([Reuters, 23 December 2019](#)). In September 2022, a new round of protests followed the death of 22-year old Mahsa Amini, who had been mistreated by Iran's morality police for not wearing her headscarf correctly. In contrast with previous protests, more sections of society joined this time, including many young people and teenagers, while the protests even spread to more conservative cities like Qom and Mashhad ([Euronews, 5 December 2022](#)). At least 522 people, including 70 minors and 68 members of Iranian security services, were reported to have been killed in the period September 2022 - January 2023 ([Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 15 January 2023](#)). The Iranian regime responded with harsh sentences for thousands of arrested protesters, including death penalties for dozens of them. Within the first six months of 2023, at least 352 persons were executed (a significant increase compared to previous years), including at least seven for their involvement in the protests ([Iran Human Rights, accessed 26 June 2023](#) / [BBC News, 19 May 2023](#)).

Many Iranian Christians, both from historical and convert communities inside and outside the country have given support to the most recent uprising of Iran's population for freedom, which uses the now well-known slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom". At the same time, the Iranian regime continued to use the voices of its recognized Christian minority as part of its propaganda drive against the ongoing protests. Armenian and Assyrian religious leaders and parliamentary representatives explicitly warned

their members not to get involved in the protests ([Article 18, 10 November 2022](#)). Meanwhile, Christians from both the historical Christian communities and converts from Islam to Christianity remain oppressed - see below: *Religious landscape*.

Political and legal landscape

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocracy combined with a presidential system. The president is elected, but ultimately power rests in the hands of the clergy, with hardliner Ayatollah Ali Khamenei being the Supreme Leader and having the highest authority.

Within the current Iranian political spectrum, there is a division between the Islamic left (Reformists), the Pragmatists and the Islamic right (referred to as "Principlists" or "hardliners"). Before the February 2020 elections, the Islamic Consultative Assembly (i.e. the parliament) was dominated by the Reformists, reflecting to a certain extent the voice of the Iranian people (although only political parties and factions loyal to the establishment and to the state ideology are permitted to operate). However, the hardliners took over after the elections in February 2020 were boycotted by the opposition. In June 2021, the presidential elections saw hardliner Ebrahim Raisi win the elections, after the opposition boycotted the elections again after most candidates (almost 99%) were rejected by the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council, which has the power to veto all parliament legislation and has to approve all major political candidates, is also dominated by the Principlists. The appointments of the Guardian Council are controlled by the Supreme Leader. Hence, ultimate power rests in his hands, as do the unelected institutions under his control. These institutions, including the security forces and the judiciary, play a major role in the suppression of dissent and other restrictions on civil liberties. Even Reformist parties have come under increased state repression, especially since 2009. This makes it unlikely that Iran will see any significant political change in the short term. 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.

Christians with official recognition

Under the Constitution, Christianity is one of the three legally recognized ethnic religious minorities in Iran. Through this recognition, ethnic minority Christians maintain the right, at least in principle, to exercise their faith. Article 13 of the Constitution states: "Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized 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." As interpreted by the Iranian government, these rights pertain only to ethnic minority Christians (not to Iranian converts to Christianity) who act within the limits of the law, including non-codified principles of Islamic law.

However, even ethnic minority Christians face much legalized and social discrimination:

- They are not allowed to hold services in Persian (Farsi) or print religious materials in Persian;
- They face employment restrictions (being Muslim is a requirement for many jobs, in particular in government positions, and the authorities have been known to force Muslim employers to dismiss Christian employees);
- They face marriage restrictions (for instance, the Civil Code prohibits a non-Muslim man from marrying a Muslim woman);

- They face unequal treatment by the courts;
- They are not allowed to adopt children;
- Wearing the Islamic hijab in public is compulsory for all women in Iran, including Christians;
- A Christian cannot inherit property from a Muslim (which encourages some Christians to convert to Islam for financial reasons). Moreover, Article 881 of the Iranian Civil Code provides that when an 'infidel' dies, if there is any Muslim among the beneficiaries, this legatee inherits all the property even if only a distant relative. Even the recognized religious minorities are referred to as 'infidels' in this article.
- Christians are also not allowed to hold public offices such as being a judge, qualify for the presidency or be elected to local councils (except for three out of five designated seats for religious minorities in the *Majlis*, the Iranian parliament).

In addition, the government forces recognized churches to reject any Muslim trying to be baptized into the Christian faith and requires a church to register all its members. The government closes any church that does not comply. For this reason, converts are forced to meet in informal house-churches or to practice their faith in isolation.

Christians without official recognition

The Iranian regime categorically denies persecuting Christian converts from a Muslim background. Instead of charging converts with apostasy, the regime accuses them of being part of a wider plot whereby evangelical Christians conspire with the Israeli and US governments in an attempt to overthrow the Iranian regime. Hence, many Iranian converts received lengthy prison sentences for 'acting against national security'. As mentioned above (in: *Specific examples of positive developments*), the November 2021 ruling from Iran's Supreme Court that house-church activities should not be considered as acts against national security is a hopeful sign. Similarly, the acquittal of a convert couple in May 2023 by the same branch of the Supreme Court, shows that the Principlists are apparently not completely controlling all government institutions. However, despite the fact that even officials within the judiciary recognize that the charges against converts are groundless, it is still unlikely that hardliners within the regime will stop persecuting converts.

Further reports

- **Middle East Concern** ([MEC Iran country profile](#), accessed 7 August 2024): " Although apostasy is not proscribed by the Penal Code ..., the Code makes provision for judges to rely on authoritative Islamic sources in matters not covered by the Code – effectively providing scope for Islamic law sanctions to be applied for apostasy (though there are no known examples of judicial death sentences having been applied for apostasy since 1990)."
- **Economist Intelligence Unit** ([Democracy Index 2023](#)): Iran is classified as 'authoritarian'.
- **Human Right Watch** ([HRW 2024 Iran country chapter](#)): "Iranian authorities brutally cracked down on the “woman, life, freedom” protests sparked after the September 2022 death in morality police custody of Mahsa Jina Amini, an Iranian-Kurdish woman, killing hundreds and arresting thousands of protestors. Scores of activists, including human rights defenders, members of ethnic and religious minorities, and dissidents remain in prison on vague national security charges or

are serving sentences after grossly unfair trials. Security forces' impunity is rampant, with no government investigations into their use of excessive and lethal force, torture, sexual assault, and other serious abuses. Authorities have expanded their efforts in enforcing abusive compulsory hijab laws. Security agencies have also targeted family members of those killed during the protests."

- **FFP Fragile States Index (FSI 2024 Iran)**: reports that factionalized elites and group grievances remained very high, an indication of the looming conflict between those in power and ordinary Iranian citizens, as displayed in the protests following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022.

Gender perspective

The legal landscape facing women and girls is additionally restrictive, in particular making marriage a place of enacting violent repression of female converts. Iran is one of just six UN states not to have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and it has one of the world's lowest female participation [rates](#) in parliament (World Bank Gender Data Portal, last accessed 7 August 2024). The 1979 Islamic Revolution crippled the rights of women in relation to marriage, divorce and child custody by terminating the Family Protection Law. The legal age for marriage currently stands at 13 for girls and 15 for boys, although marriages can be carried out earlier with the consent of a male guardian and court judge (Civil Code, Article 1041). 17% of girls are reportedly married by the age of 18 ([Girls Not Brides Iran](#), accessed 7 August 2024).

Divorce laws prevent women and girls from escaping an abusive situation. A man has the right to divorce his wife by *talaq*, whereas women must file through the courts for divorce. In addition to the challenges of providing considerable evidence to support her case, many women fear the stigma attached to divorce. Upon divorce, a woman will likely lose [custody](#) of their children, particularly if she is a convert to Christianity (UNDP, 2019, "Gender Justice and the Law", p.21). By law, women receive only half of the inheritance men will receive. They can also not apply for a passport or leave the country without their husbands' permission.

In short, the Iranian regime has created an 'apartheid state' in which women (as well as non-Shia Muslims) are systemically marginalized. Women cannot study certain subjects, play certain sports, enter stadiums or mingle with men. Both women and those belonging to ethnic and religious minorities cannot become judges or get elected or appointed into key positions, including Supreme Leader, President of the Country, President of the Judiciary System, Member of the Guardian Council or Expediency Council, among others. This systematic discrimination is one of the key reason why many Iranians have joined the widespread demonstrations which began in September 2022 under the slogan "Woman, Life, Liberty." The Iranian authorities, in response to the national protests, proposed [new measures](#) to enforce the compulsory wearing of the hijab, which include the use of surveillance cameras to identify and prosecute women who defy Iran's mandatory dress code, with threats to [confiscate](#) vehicles carrying unveiled female passengers (Reuters, 11 April 2023; BBC News, 12 June 2023).

Religious landscape

Iran: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	800,000	0.9
Muslim	88,288,763	98.3
Hindu	45,679	0.1
Buddhist	821	0.0
Ethnic religionist	5,810	0.0
Jewish	8,214	0.0
Bahai	277,477	0.3
Atheist	10,117	0.0
Agnostic	275,474	0.3
Other	96,165	0.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024 (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

Iran is home to a rich variety of religious and ethnic groups who have a long history in the region. Officially, most Iranians follow Twelver Ja’afari Shia Islam, which is the official state religion. However, a significant minority of [10% follows Sunni Islam](#) (World Population Review, accessed 7 August 2024). Interestingly, a 2020 survey entitled "Iranians attitudes towards religion" found that only 32.2% of the Iranians consider themselves Shiite Muslim, with 22.2% not identifying with any religion or belief. According to the survey, 1.5% respondents indicated they were Christian ([GAMAAN, last accessed 26 June 2023](#); [Christianity Today, 3 September 2020](#)).

Although the Armenian and Assyrian Christians enjoy some religious freedom, they remain tightly monitored and restricted (see above: *Political and Legal landscape*). There is almost no contact between historical church Christians and Christians from a Muslim background. The latter do not enjoy any religious freedom and have to keep their faith hidden. If a convert's new faith becomes known, they are very likely to lose their employment. Government officials in particular will put them under pressure to renounce their faith, as will wider society (but to a lesser extent).

Interest in Christianity (and other non-Islamic religions) has continued unabated among a population predominantly disillusioned with Islam. Christians in Iran report an increase of agnosticism and nominal adherence to Islam, especially in urban areas. Being a non-Muslim brings a host of limitations and unfair discrimination to one’s private and public life in Iran. Religious and political leaders in Iran continue to speak out against Christianity and hardliners maintain their almost absolute power in

domestic affairs, which affects human rights. It is therefore unsurprising that the Christian community experiences repression in various forms. The Iranian intelligence service (MOIS) closely monitors Christian activities and other religious minorities, together with the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRCG). They are responsible for raids on Christian gatherings in private homes, arresting those in attendance and confiscating personal property. Those arrested are subjected to intensive and often aggressive interrogation.

Converts with a Muslim background constitute the largest group of Christians in the country and there are also many Iranians abroad who have converted to Christianity. The second largest group are the Armenian and Assyrian Christian communities, the only Christians who are officially recognized by the Iranian government and protected by law but treated as second-class citizens. As already stated above, Christianity is considered a condemnable Western and 'Zionist' influence and a constant threat to the Islamic identity of the Republic. This is especially the case since Christian numbers have grown considerably over recent years - above all, the number of Christians with a Muslim background - and allegedly even children of political and religious leaders are leaving Islam for Christianity. Since virtually all Persian-language church services are prohibited and only some ageing communities remain, most converts gather in informal house-church meetings or receive information on the Christian faith via satellite TV and websites.

Apart from Christians, the rights of other religious minorities like Jews, Bahai, Zoroastrians, Dervish and Sunni Muslims are violated as well. Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism are recognized in the Constitution, while religions that are not recognized in the Constitution, like Bahai, are particularly affected.

Further reports

- **Humanists International** ([Freedom of Thought Report Iran](#), updated 24 October 2023): "The constitution declares that Islam (Ja'afari Shiism) is the state religion. ... Articles 12 and 13 divide citizens of the Islamic Republic of Iran into four religious categories: Muslims, Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians. ... As a result, the non-religious are effectively left out and precluded from certain legal rights or protections: Iranians must declare their faith in one of the four officially recognized religions in order to be able to claim a number of legal rights, such as the capacity to apply for the general examination to enter any university in Iran. By law, non-Muslims may not serve in the judiciary, the security services, or as public school principals. ... The Baha'i faith is not recognized and is routinely described by authorities as a heretical variant on Islam, against the self-identification of the Baha'i community as a distinct religion which encompasses multiple traditions. Its members face immense discrimination. ... Sufism is similarly denounced by Shia clerics in public statements. Security services harass and intimidate prominent Sufi leaders and the government restricts Sufi activities."

Gender perspective

Islamic law dictates that women must adopt Islamic dress in public spaces – a cloth head-covering (hijab) and a long jacket (manteau), or a large full-length covering (chador, as is mandatory at government functions). Should they fail to do so, they may be arrested and sentenced to flogging and/or a fine ([Al-Monitor, 23 July 2022](#)). Thousands of mostly female students – who have been at the forefront of the recent uprising – were victims of a series of “organized chemical attacks”, particularly

those in the hometown of Mahsa Amini, whose death in custody of Iran's morality police in September 2022 sparked international outcry (AL Monitor, 11 April 2023). Over [100 arrests](#) have been made in connection with these targeted attacks (VOA, 12 March 2023).

Economic landscape

According to the [CIA World Factbook Iran](#) (accessed 7 August 2024) and [World Bank Iran data](#) (accessed 7 August 2024):

- **Gross National Income per capita:** 16,540 USD (2021, PPP)
- **Poverty:** in 2022, an estimated 30% of the population lived below the poverty line, with some sources suggesting that even as high as 60% of the population struggle to survive ([Arab Center Washington DC, 23 April 2023](#), [IRAM, 31 December 2021](#), [Financial Times, 25 January 2021](#)).
- **Unemployment rate:** Approximately 11.5% (2021), with youth unemployment being more than twice as high at 27.2% (2021)

According to World Bank's [Iran Economic Monitor Spring 2024](#):

- **Economy:** "Iran's economy is growing for a fourth consecutive year aided by the recovery in the oil sector and despite ongoing economic sanctions.
- **GDP:** "Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth accelerated to 5 percent year-over-year (y/y) between April and December 2023, which corresponds with the first nine months of the Iranian year of 2023/24 (9M-23/24), driven by the oil sector and services. The oil sector, accounting for 8.6 percent of GDP in the period, expanded by 16.3 percent (y/y) fueled by a tighter global oil market and improved oil exports despite sanctions. The non-oil sector also grew by 3.5 percent (y/y), supported by domestic demand and exports to selected neighbors. "
- **Current account surplus:** "A decline in oil prices and higher imports narrowed the current account surplus in 2023/24 despite an expansion in export volumes. ... The greater concentration of trade to the top 3 key trading partners makes external accounts even more susceptible to terms of trade shocks and the demand of key partners. Recent efforts including membership in BRICS (the intergovernmental organization originally comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) aim to promote trade but have had limited impact due to non-membership in Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and ongoing sanctions.
- **Economic outlook:** "GDP growth is forecast to moderate to an annual average of 2.8 percent during 2024/25 to 2026/27. ... The economic outlook is subject to significant risks related to economic, climate change, and geopolitical developments. A sharper than anticipated decline in global demand and oil prices would adversely affect economic growth and further limit the fiscal space needed for pro-growth and social protection measures. The growing concentration of trade with limited trading partners such as China, exposes the economy to fluctuations in these partners' economic prospects. "

Iran's economy profited from the lifting of (economic) sanctions following the international nuclear deal in 2015. Although increased oil revenues was a great boost, Iran's economy kept struggling, especially because of a lack of institutional reform. This situation has worsened since the withdrawal of the USA from the nuclear deal and the re-imposition of US-sanctions. The re-imposed sanctions have prolonged the post-COVID-19 recovery process.

A major issue in the country is that Article 44 of the Iranian Constitution prescribes "that all major industries should be government owned" ([Radio Farda, 25 July 2017](#)). In May 2005, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei provided an important new interpretation of this Article, allowing more privatization and a reduction of the state sector. Instead of private companies, the very conservative Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), the powerful military and security organization commissioned to protect the regime, used this opportunity to build its own semi-state economic empire. As the IRGC is very well connected to the judiciary and other state branches, it has become almost impossible to carry out major reforms. This explains why economist Dr Bijan Khajepour writes on Iran: "Although privatization picked up pace ..., it happened for all the wrong reasons, especially as a process for expanding the economic interests of the semi-state sector which put additional pressures on the genuine private sector" ([Anatomy of the Iranian Economy](#), Swedish Institute of International Affairs, June 2020, p.16).

Symbolic for Iran's semi-state-driven economy is its blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force, the global anti-money laundering watchdog ([FATF, June 2023](#)). This will make it harder for Tehran to obtain foreign currency and makes it more difficult for foreign companies to invest in Iran ([Iran News Wire, 24 February 2020](#)). Even more telling is the regime's response to this blacklisting, when it claimed that complying with such anti-terrorism norms would endanger its survival.

Iranian Christians, both from a historical church and Muslim background, face great difficulties in the midst of this economic uncertainty. On top of the general economic problems, they face high levels of legal and social discrimination. Iran's unemployment rate has been above 10% for the last decade. The situation for university graduates is particularly difficult since they make up 40% of the unemployed (BTI Iran report 2022). Iran's economy, which is reliant on government initiatives, has little growth potential as it is hardly capable of creating new jobs. One of the characteristics of the Iranian government is the discrimination it imposes on the job market. Individuals who at least pretend to be loyal to the Islamic Republic are in a better position for finding work with government employers.

Gender perspective

Women are, in general, the most economically vulnerable in Iran due to both low female employment rates (see: [UNDP Human Development Report Iran](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024) and patrilineal inheritance practices. Sharia rules of inheritance are applied, whereby daughters typically receive half the share that sons receive. Besides discriminatory employment policies like the requirement of written consent from husbands, the coronavirus pandemic also had a regressive impact on women's participation in the workforce, according to Human Rights Watch ([HRW, 16 November 2022](#)).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [CIA World Factbook Iran](#) (accessed 7 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the population is from Persian descent, with other ethnicities being Azeri, Kurd, Lur, Baloch, Arab, Turkmen and Turkic tribes
- **Main languages:** The official language is Persian (Farsi), with minority groups speaking Azeri and other Turkic dialects, Kurdish, Gilaki and Mazandarani, Luri, Balochi and Arabic
- **Urban population:** 77.3% of total population lives in urban areas (2023), with an annual urbanization rate of 1.32%

- **Fertility rate:** 1,9 children born per woman (2024 est.).
- **Median age:** 33.8 years. The younger generation - up to 14 years of age - makes up around 23.3% of the population.
- **Life expectancy:** 75.6 years on average; women (77.1 years), men (74.3 years).
- **Literacy rate:** 88.7% of the population over 15 years of age can read and write, with a significant difference between men (92.4%) and women (88.7%) (2021)
- **Education:** In general, both male and female Iranians enjoy 15 years of education. However, according to ([BTI Iran Report 2022](#)), although no less than 2,640 universities exist in the country, levels of education are poor on the whole. Education "suffers from both externally imposed sanctions and blatant internal mismanagement and the predominance of religious dogmas over rational decision-making" . This is probably part of the reason why Iran ranked 128th out 141 countries on "critical thinking in education" and 92nd in "overall skills" in the World Economic Forum's [Global Competitiveness Report 2019](#).
- **IDPs/Refugees:** Around 1.25 million Afghan refugees, with 500,000 undocumented, reside in the country, alongside 12,000 Iraqi's (2022).

[UNDP Human Development Report Iran](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024:

- **HDI score and ranking:** Iran ranks #78 out 193 countries. Despite the ongoing difficulties, the combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a high HDI score of 0.780. Iranians view education of both men and women as highly important. As a result, Iran is "witnessing the emergence of a young, dynamic and educated society" ([Anatomy of the Iranian Economy](#), Swedish Institute of International Affairs, June 2020, p.9). However, "Religious minorities in Iran, such as Baha'is, Christians, Sunni Muslims, Dervishes, Jews and others, face discrimination and persecution within the Shi'a-majority country. Members of these minorities are systematically excluded from high-ranking positions and frequently experience discrimination in their daily lives. This discrimination results in arrests, victimization, business license revocation and forced shop closures" ([BTI Iran Report 2024](#)).
- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.880, women are still clearly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Iranian society and culture is conservative on the surface, but there is a significant underground culture dominated by the younger generation and dissenting artists. Persian culture can be traced to origins long before the arrival of Islam and Iranians are proud of these pre-Islamic cultural roots. This also finds its expression in the Persian names given to children.

Urbanization is rapidly increasing with vast numbers of people leaving rural areas to seek more opportunities and a better life in the cities, which also leads to a further secularization of society.

Iranian Christians report that many of Iran's youth have no interest in Islam and work to get around its restrictions. Women's rights movements and educated women will likely grow in influence, but the government continues to take harsh measures against them ([Amnesty International, Iran 2023](#)). The "brain drain" from Iran will likely continue, as few believe change is possible and choose instead to leave the country. As a result, the Iranian diaspora is growing rapidly and is presently estimated to number about 6 million. Faced with limited opportunities at home, thousands of Iranians leave the

country each year to work or study abroad, often not intending to return ([Migration Policy Institute, 22 April 2021](#)).

Violations of the rights of Christians in Iran are mainly state-driven and societal views on Christianity, especially in urban areas, are more positive than in neighboring countries. Nonetheless, family pressure, stemming from a mixture of Islamic conviction and concepts around preserving the honor of the family, remains a significant problem for Iranian converts from Islam to Christianity. In addition, there is a growing trend among the younger generation to view all religion, including Christianity, with skepticism.

Gender perspective

Despite an evolving socio-cultural landscape, Islamic norms continue to dominate. Women and girls are viewed as second-class citizens who should fulfil traditional roles as a wife and mother. Women require permission from a male guardian to obtain a passport or to travel freely, restricting their physical freedom ([Reuters, 12 October 2022](#)). Iran has a strong honor-shame culture and so-called 'honor killings' remain prevalent. The longstanding "Protection, Dignity and Security of Women against Violence" bill, which had been under discussion in parliament since September 2019, was approved in January 2023 ([Al-Jazeera, 28 February 2023](#)). Whilst it contains several gaps, such as its failure to address marital rape ([HRW, 4 December 2020](#)), several legal hurdles remain, including deliberation and vetting by the Guardian Council, consisting of jurists and religious experts.

Technological landscape

According to [Datareportal Digital 2024: Iran](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 81.7% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 53.6% of the total population
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 163.7% of the total population

According to Georgetown, 80% of women in Iran used a mobile phone in 2023. Whilst small compared to other countries, there remains a gender gap in relation to mobile phone usage ([GIWPS Iran country profile](#), accessed 7 August 2024).

Although the majority of the Iranian population has Internet access, usage differs greatly between rural and urban communities. The government is known to limit access or even slow down the Internet in order to contain discontent and protests, while censoring all Internet content. Mobile phones are widely used but with constant monitoring of calls and SMS texts.

Freedom House' [Freedom on the Net 2023](#) report rates Iran as "Not Free", with a very low score of 11/100 points. According to the report:

- "The Iranian regime employs extensive censorship, surveillance, content manipulation, and extralegal harassment against internet users, making Iran's online environment one of the world's most restrictive." According to a previous report by Freedom House ([Freedom on the Net 2019](#)), the Iranian Cyber Police unit has no less than 42,000 volunteers who monitor online speech. Those who are found opposing the regime, are likely to be arrested and imprisoned; even reporting critically on the spread of COVID-19 in the country saw several journalists end up in jail.

- The report also states that the Iranian government actively tries to hack accounts belonging to government critics and human rights organizations. For example, "two Persian language content moderators at Instagram claimed that they were offered financial bribes by members of the Iranian intelligence service to delete the account of Iranian American activist, Masih Alinejad. Both content moderators also claimed that they observed 'pro-regime bias' while reviewing Iranian content."

RSF's [World Press Freedom Index 2024](#) ranks Iran #176 out of 180 countries. It states:

- "Iran has reinforced its position as one of the world's most repressive countries in terms of press freedom since a huge wave of protests began in reaction to the death, on 16 September 2022, of Mahsa Amini, a student arrested for being "inappropriately dressed". Iran is now also one of the world's biggest jailers of journalists. ... journalists and independent media in Iran are constantly persecuted by means of arbitrary arrests and very heavy sentences handed down after grossly unfair trials before revolutionary courts. ... Though the repression against freedom of information was already very strong, with journalists facing arrests, interrogations, imprisonments, surveillance, harassment, and threats, it became much worse since the outbreak of the wave of triggered by Mahsa Amini's death in police custody. More than 70 journalists, many of them women, were arrested as the authorities stopped at nothing in their efforts to prevent coverage of the protests. Even Iranian journalists based abroad were subjected to pressure ranging from online harassment to death threats."

In an effort to stop Western influence, the government has prohibited the possession of satellite dishes (although many still own them nevertheless). The authorities hinder the access to satellite broadcast channels and Internet sites which 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. However, Iranian Christians report that contact with the wider world is nonetheless growing rapidly through such media as satellite TV and Internet, despite all restrictions and monitoring by the government.

Iran has bought state-of-the-art monitoring systems from China and is able to monitor its citizens, including their movements, purchases, tele-communications and online activity. There is also evidence to suggest that Iran monitors individuals from religious minorities, who are considered to be a threat, even when they are outside the country. Thus, those inside the country active in Internet ministry among Muslims (and also Muslims interested in Christianity) run the risk of being questioned and/or arrested if discovered. But even a Christian's public and private online presence (including email correspondence) while located outside of Iran could lead to the Iranian government's identification of their faith (Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Iran's Internal Targets, 4 January 2018](#)).

Security situation

Following the death of 22-year old Mahsa Amini in police custody in September 2022, Iran saw the most widespread demonstrations in its history, with several different layers of society uniting against the regime ([ACLEDE, 12 April 2023](#)). Amini died after being arrested for not adhering to the strict dress code enforced in the country. Iran's religious police, the Guidance Patrol, regulate adherence to Sharia-

based law and it is common that this police force carries out arrests and issues fines for non-adherence ([BBC News, 22 April 2016](#)). In November 2022, it was rumored that this police force had been disbanded, but those claims seem to be untrue ([AP News, 5 December 2022](#)). As mentioned above, the street protests continued into 2023, and at least 522 people, including 70 minors and 68 members of Iranian security services, were killed during the demonstrations ([Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 15 January 2023](#)). This high number of deaths among the regime's security personnel shows that positions are hardening, as more and more Iranians want a regime change. These protests compare with previous demonstrations in November 2019, which had already been the bloodiest in decades, with around 1,500 demonstrators killed, in what started as a protest against rising petrol prices ([Reuters, 23 December 2019](#)). Besides those major popular uprisings, many smaller (regional) protests have also taken place.

The Iranian security forces, especially those directly under control of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are well-trained, well-equipped and well-known for using violence against demonstrators. They are supported by a variety of intelligence services and Iran's secret service is also known for its operations abroad (also in the West). Executing or kidnapping Iranian dissidents abroad has been an ongoing practice for years ([Al-Arabiya, 16 July 2021](#)), even within Western countries ([AIVD, 8 January 2019](#)). In July 2021, the USA prevented the kidnapping of Masih Alinejad, Iran's most well-known critic and social media activist. A year later, another plot to kill her was blocked as well. She now lives under 24-hour police protection, while her brother has been sentenced to years in prison in order to put her under pressure ([TIME, 2 March 2023](#)).

Internally, there is an ongoing threat of attack by violent Sunni militants in Iran - particularly in the Sistan and Baluchestan provinces ([World Politics Review, 30 April 2019](#)). This is mainly to be seen as a consequence of Iran's oppression of Iranian Sunni Muslims ([Reuters, 2 March 2021](#)). In October 2022, at least 82 Balochi were killed by Iranian security forces to quell protests in the regional capital Zahedan ([Amnesty International, 6 October 2022](#)), while Balochis "are grossly overrepresented in execution numbers" ([Iran Human Rights, 3 May 2023](#)).

The fight against "the West"

In the past few years, Iran has increased its efforts in forging alliances with Middle Eastern countries in the fight against "The West" and against the threat of the (Sunni) Islamic State group (IS) and its affiliates. Alliances with Hezbollah (Syria, Lebanon) and Hamas (Gaza) are well-known, but smaller Shiite groups also enjoy Iran's support. These alliances are mainly supported by members or units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This elite force has experience in fighting opposition in Iran internally and has also been deployed in several other countries (such as Syria and Iraq). Apart from the Revolutionary Guard Corps, there is also the Basij Militia which consists of volunteers and is part of the Revolutionary Guard. Both will defend Iran at all costs, if the country is attacked. Iran prefers to fight all wars abroad, but following the [killing of Hamas leader Ishmail Haniyeh in Tehran](#) in July 2024 (BBC News, 31 July 2024), it is not unlikely that the tensions might spill over and more Israeli attacks on Iranian soil will take place.

Another example of the IRGC's involvement abroad is its support for the Houthi rebel movement in Yemen ([Middle East Institute, 6 December 2018](#)). Although the Houthi rebels are not an Iranian proxy force like Lebanon's Hezbollah, it is unlikely that the Houthis would have been able to attack Saudi

Arabia's biggest oil processing facility (September 2019) or industrial areas near Abu Dhabi in the UAE (January 2022) without help from Iran. Iran faces tensions with Saudi Arabia and in particular with the USA, although rapprochement efforts with the Sunni kingdom led to a Chinese-brokered deal in March 2023 to normalize ties. While this deal itself might not be very meaningful, it is significant in the way it gave China a role in the Middle East normally reserved for the USA and hindered any further rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran's arch-enemy, Israel ([Foreign Policy, 6 April 2023](#)).

Tensions between the USA and its Gulf allies are partly due to allegations against Iran made by the USA and partly due to violent activities in the Strait of Hormuz. Iran is being held responsible for so-called terrorist activities in Saudi Arabia and for seizing foreign (oil)tankers ([Al-Jazeera, 3 May 2023](#)). The assassination of Iran's most senior military commander Major General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 could easily have acted as a tipping point bringing direct war between the USA and Iran, but the Iranian regime probably had to limit its response due to declining internal support and the fear of further domestic unrest. However, the naval shadow war with Israel increased in 2021 with the Israelis damaging an alleged Iranian 'spy ship' and with Iran's largest navy vessel mysteriously catching fire and sinking ([BBC News, 7 April 2021](#); [The Guardian, 2 June 2021](#)).

Israel and Iran in conflict

In March 2021, Israel apparently downed two Iranian drones heading towards Israel. Meanwhile, Israel has been attacking Iranian targets in Syria for several years now ([BBC News, 13 January 2021](#); [New York Times, 13 July 2022](#); [Reuters, 13 November 2022](#); [AP News, 5 April 2023](#)). In May 2022, Israel assassinated the deputy head of an IRGC special unit in front of his house in Tehran, who was allegedly involved in worldwide kidnappings ([The Times of Israel, 26 May 2022](#)), another execution in a long list of Israeli killings ([USIP, 30 January 2023](#)).

In June 2022, Turkey foiled an alleged Iranian retaliation plot to kill Israeli tourists in Turkey ([Al-Jazeera, 23 June 2022](#)), with another attack being prevented a year later in Cyprus ([The Times of Israel, 25 June 2023](#)). In the meantime, the threat of an all-out war between Israel and Iran is not unrealistic, as Israel keeps the option for a direct attack on Iran's nuclear facilities open. It has considered this for years, but might decide to go ahead in the future since in April 2023 Iran and its proxies managed to launch small scale attacks from multiple fronts ([FDD, 10 April 2023](#)) and internal Israeli political unrest might give a reason to unite all-out against a foreign enemy ([TIME, 13 June 2023](#)). However, all previous hostilities were outweighed by far by Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, which resulted in the outbreak of the current Israel-Hamas war. Iran has supported Hamas for years, but claims to have had no knowledge about the attack ([Jerusalem Post, 15 November 2023](#)). Although the regime seems to use its proxies to put pressure on Israel, with Hezbollah launching rockets into the border region and the Houthis starting to attack ships in the Red Sea, Iran seems not to be prepared to directly join in open war. The lack of domestic support undoubtedly plays a major role in this hesitation ([Clingendael, 30 November 2023](#)). Nonetheless, in April 2024, Israel killed multiple senior Iranian army officials in Syria to which Iran responded with firing over 100 rockets and drones towards Israel, with 99% of them being intercepted by Israel with help from the USA, the UK, Jordan and other countries. Subsequently, with the already mentioned July 2024 assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, while Haniyeh was attending the inauguration of President Pezeshkian. A major Iranian response is expected, as Iran will try to improve its deterrence, but has not taken place as of date ([Times of Israel, 4 August 2024](#)).

The Christian perspective

For Christians, especially those from a Muslim background, the biggest threat is from the Iranian security services. Previously, the MOIS, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, was the main instrument for arresting Christians. However, in recent years, more and more house raids are being conducted by the IRGC. The IRGC agents are notorious for being disrespectful and prone to violent behavior, both during arrests and interrogation. It is clear that the (online) activities of Christians are extensively monitored and information gathered is used against them in interrogation and trials as evidence of action against 'national security' or 'espionage for Zionist regimes'. It is believed that thousands of Iranian Christians from a Muslim background flee the country out of fear of arrest, psychological torture (including solitary confinement) and long-term prison sentences. Others receive harsh warnings and are forced to sign papers in which they agree to never get in (online) contact again with other Iranian or foreign Christians or to search for online Christian material. Due to the high levels of pressure, it is likely that many Iranian converts comply and are forced to become isolated believers.

Christian origins

Iranians (Parthians, Medes and Elamites) were among the first believers in Jesus Christ according to the Bible (Book of Acts, chapter 2). 60 Christian tombs dating back to the 3rd century AD have been found on Kharg Island, close to Iran's mainland, indicating a strong early Christian presence.

The Iranian church had some importance as indicated by the fact that Bishop "John of Persia of the churches of the whole of Persia and in the great India" was in attendance at the Council of Nicea in 325. In 344, a wave of persecution started as the Christians were accused of conspiring with the Roman empire. Over the next 40 years, at least 35,000 Christians were reportedly killed. However, the Church survived and at the Synod of Mar Isaac (410) it became the independent Church of the East, adopting the Nicene Creed.

Separation from the Western churches occurred when the Church of the East supported the 'heretical' archbishop Nestorius, adopting their own creed in 486 which rejected both Monophysitism and the Council of Chalcedon. Despite further persecution and heavy resistance from the Zoroastrians, the Church had enough influence for the Shah to declare in 590 AD: "My throne stands on four feet ... on Jews and Christians, as well as Magians and Zoroastrians". The Nestorian church was very active in spreading Christianity to Central Asia, India, Mongolia and even China.

Arab armies invaded Persia in 642 AD. As Islam took root, the Christian population was forced into 'dhimmitude'. Public worship became severely restricted, Christians had to pay twice as much tax and had no right to public office. Evangelizing became difficult and many non-Muslims converted to Islam. Nonetheless, the real blow was dealt by the Moguls who between the 12th and 14th centuries killed thousands of Assyrian Christians and almost completely destroyed the Church of the East. In 1830, some remnants of the Nestorian Church entered into agreement with Rome and became "Chaldean Catholics".

It was the Armenian Christians coming in from the north from the 16th century onwards that established a permanent Christian community in Iran, despite times of persecution. The Armenian Christians were well connected with Armenians residing in foreign countries and often fulfilled a bridge

function between Iran and the outside world. Although less well-treated since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, they still have an official presence in Iran.

Protestant missions were established from the 19th century onwards, they were responsible for translating the New Testament into Persian for the first time in 1812. However, most Protestant church members came from a Nestorian background since mission-work among the Muslims remained difficult. The Anglican Church, which had the most Muslim converts, counted only 350 of them in 1936. Nevertheless, Christian influence in the 19th and 20th century was significant through church-run schools, hospitals and village clinics. Major restrictions followed the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Proselytizing became illegal, conversion punishable by death and the building of new churches became impossible.

(Source: Bradley, M: "Iran and Christianity Historical Identity and Present Relevance", New York, 2008, pp. 137-158.)

Church spectrum today

Iran: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox		20.3
Catholic		0.7
Protestant		4.6
Independent		72.9
Unaffiliated		1.6
Doubly-affiliated Christians		0.0
Total		100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement		14.2
Pentecostal-Charismatic		49.8

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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:** Christians 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. **Evangelical movement:** 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. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Although there are no exact numbers regarding the historical Armenian and Assyrian communities, all sources agree that their numbers have decreased significantly since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The once significant historical Armenian community has declined by more than 80 percent. Although there is unclarity and Iranian official figures even suggest a renewed increase over the last two

decades, the Armenian community has probably fallen in membership from 250,000 at its peak before the Revolution in 1979 to around 30 - 35,000 today.

[Source: James Barry. *Armenian Christians in Iran: Ethnicity, Religion, and Identity in the Islamic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. if, 245-73.]

Similarly, the Assyrian community dwindled from 200,000 before 1979 to 50,000 today, with other sources claiming that only 20,000 Assyrians remain ([Assyrian Policy](#), accessed 17 December 2023; [Refworld](#), accessed 17 December 2023).

A distinction must be made between ethnicity and denomination here - although the majority of the Armenians and Assyrians belong to the Armenian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East respectively, others belong to the Armenian Catholic Church and the (Assyrian) Chaldean Catholic Church (both belonging to the wider Roman Catholic Church). An even smaller number have become Protestant, belonging to a number of denominations including the Assemblies of God, the Assyrian Pentecostal Church, the Assyrian Evangelical Church, the Armenian Evangelical Church and the Anglican Church, among others.

Although the Protestant churches in particular were joined by a (small) number of converts from Islam to Christianity in the past, nowadays it is impossible to integrate converts in any of the Armenian or Assyrian churches. Hence, the majority of the thousands of Iranians converting to Christianity gather in small groups in private, forming thousands of unconnected house-churches; others practice their faith in isolation, often only connected to other Christians via the Internet. Ethnic Armenians and Assyrians, often belonging to the Protestant denominations involved with and supporting house-churches, have been prosecuted and sentenced to long prison terms in the recent past.

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Iran>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.
- [Iran - The reality for Christians - Revised May 2021](#)

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