

# FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

## IRAN

### LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

#### Contents

Introduction.....	3
Copyright Notice .....	3
Introduction.....	3
WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Iran .....	4
Link for general background information .....	4
Recent country history .....	4
The religious landscape .....	4
The political landscape.....	5
The socio-economic landscape .....	5
Concluding remarks.....	6
External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Iran .....	6
WWL 2019: Church History and Facts.....	8
How many Christians?.....	8
How did Christians get there?.....	8
What church networks exist today? .....	8
Religious context .....	8
Notes on the current situation.....	9
WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile .....	10
Introduction.....	10
What type of persecution dominates? .....	10
Who is driving persecution?.....	10
What it results in .....	10
Violence.....	10
Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period .....	11
WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics .....	12
Introduction.....	12
Position on World Watch List (WWL).....	12

Persecution engines ..... 12

Drivers of persecution ..... 13

Context ..... 15

Christian communities and how they are affected ..... 15

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence ..... 16

5 Year trends ..... 18

Gender specific persecution..... 20

Persecution of other religious minorities ..... 21

Future outlook..... 21

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics ..... 22

Additional Reports and Articles ..... 24

    WWR in-depth reports ..... 24

    Open Doors article(s) from the region ..... 24

    World Watch Monitor news articles ..... 24

    Recent country developments ..... 24

## Introduction

### Copyright Notice

### Introduction

World Watch List Iran	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	85	9
WWL 2018	85	10
WWL 2017	85	8
WWL 2016	83	9
WWL 2015	80	7

*Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.*

**Please note:** The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

## WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Iran

### Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14541327>

### 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. 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 led to a richer and stronger Iran, whose influence in the region grew further. However, on 8 May 2018 the United States of America announced its withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – which is popularly known as "The Iran Deal". The USA also reinstated its sanctions against Iran, which had serious economic and political consequences. The Rial currency lost in value but the political consequences are even more serious. The Intelligence Unit of The Economist wrote in their [report](#) entitled "Iran on a knife edge – as nuclear deal goes up in smoke": "The long running political battle in Iran between moderates and reformists pushing for deeper relations with the West, and hardliners demanding much greater resistance to Western influence, would swing from the former to the latter." The moderates, including President Rouhani, will try to uphold the deal with the other signatories. Nevertheless, if economic circumstances further deteriorate, the hardliners will probably gain further political influence blaming the moderates for trusting the arch-enemy in the first place.

On a domestic level, there are no expectations for any improvement in terms of human rights in general or religious freedom specifically. On the contrary, conservatives in the Iranian political spectrum aim to suppress all elements that are considered a threat to the Islamic character of the regime. Especially since more and more Iranians are disagreeing with the regime and its (economic) policies, following the [major protests in January 2018](#). This undermines the legitimacy of the regime. Fearing ideologies that could replace their Islamic doctrine, the Iranian government oppresses all other ideological or religious groups. 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, 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. According to recent reports, converts from Islam to Christianity are treated as worse as non-recognized minorities.

## 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.

Iran's current leaders see the expansion of the influence of Shia Islam in the Middle East as 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

After the JCPOA was concluded, Iran's economy profited from the lifting of (economical) sanctions following the nuclear deal. Although increased oil production was a great boost, Iran's economy kept struggling, especially because of a lack of institutional reform. The situation has further worsened since the withdrawal of the USA from the JCPOA. [Focus Economics](#) on 31 July 2018: "If the U.S. succeeds in dramatically cutting much-needed oil revenues, it will badly hit the Iranian economy and exacerbate structural weaknesses, which could fuel social unrest. The threat of the sanctions is already biting, with protests flaring up in the country mainly due to the free fall of the rial in the black market and spiraling prices."

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, even though the United States have withdrawn from it. 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 “Principlists” (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; the withdrawal of the USA helps them to blame the moderates and President Rouhani for concluding the deal with the arch-enemy in the first place.

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 (convert) Christians and Bahai.

When more interaction with the wider world becomes 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, with the US's withdrawal from the JCPOA putting the moderates between a rock and a hard place.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Iran

- Recent country history: report  
[https://www.eiu.com/public/topical\\_report.aspx?campaignid=IranNuclearDeal](https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=IranNuclearDeal)
- Recent country history: major protests in January 2018  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/01/03/tens-of-thousands-of-people-protested-in-iran-this-week-heres-why/?utm\\_term=.bf188e0a6ad9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/01/03/tens-of-thousands-of-people-protested-in-iran-this-week-heres-why/?utm_term=.bf188e0a6ad9)
- The political landscape: speech  
<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/07/qassem-soleimani-boasts-of-tehrans-expanded-footprint-throughout-middle-east.php>

- The socio-economic landscape: Focus Economics  
<https://www.focus-economics.com/countries/iran>
- The socio-economic landscape: Article 44  
<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-larjani-slams-economic-performance/28637552.html>
- The socio-economic landscape: concluding note  
<http://www.focus-economics.com/countries/iran>

## WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
82,012,000	800,000	0.98

Source: Open Doors estimate for number of Christians 2018

### 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?

Since an OD-estimate has been used for the number of Christians, the WCD network data in table form is not included here.

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Of the Christian expatriates from the Far East (e.g. Philippines, South Korea) and the West, many have a Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian background.

**Historical Christian communities:** Historical ethnic Christian minorities such as 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.

**Converts to Christianity:** Converts from a Muslim background make up the largest Christian category in Iran and experience the most persecution.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** These are Christians belonging to Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal communities and often have an Armenian or Assyrian background or are second or third generation converts (i.e. their parents or grandparents had a Muslim background).

### Religious context

Religious Context: Iran	Numbers	%
Christians	For OD-estimate see above	See OD-estimate
Muslim	81,024,000	98.8
Hindu	37,100	0.0
Buddhist	480	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	4,800	0.0
Jewish	19,600	0.0
Bahai	228,000	0.3
Atheist	9,200	0.0
Agnostic	228,000	0.3
Other	93,200	0.1

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Numbers and %ages shown are based on WCD estimate: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)



## Notes on the current situation

- Christians are forbidden to share their faith with non-Christians. Muslims, who generally speak Persian, are not supposed to visit church services. Church buildings have been closed by the authorities when Christians tried to reach out to Persian speakers. Converts from Islam are considered apostate and do not enjoy religious legal protection under Iranian law. They are subject to the death penalty under Sharia law. They lose their right to inherit family possessions. They are still considered Muslim and (their children) 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 Persian 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 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Iran scored 85 points in WWL 2019 (the same as in WWL 2018) and ranked 9th.

### What type of persecution dominates?

**Islamic oppression:** Shia Islam is the official state religion and all laws must be consistent with the official interpretation of Sharia law.

**Dictatorial paranoia:** The zeal to maintain power also aims to protect the values of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Christianity is considered a condemnable Western influence and a constant threat to the Islamic identity of the Republic.

### Who is driving persecution?

The Iranian regime actively attempts to expand the influence of Shia Islam. The government sees Christians and other minorities 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 the nation's leadership.

### What it results in

Converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of persecution, especially by the government and to a lesser extent by their families and society. The government sees them as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran. Leaders of Christian convert groups have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison sentences for 'crimes against the national security'. The historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are recognized and protected by the State but are treated as second-class citizens and are not allowed contact with Muslim background Christians (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services.

### Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

World Watch List Iran	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	104	67	20	41
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	72	69	17	25

*Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to*

*psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.*

## Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- Over the WWL 2019 reporting period, there were at least 67 arrests of Christians recorded. 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. See for examples: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iran/>.
- Several house-churches were raided in the WWL 2019 reporting period. Most of these are not functioning as house churches anymore.
- During the WWL 2019 reporting period, several Christians received long prison sentences. See for example: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/iranian-christians-sentenced-verdict-says-claiming-jesus-is-lord-is-attack-against-islam/>.
- It has been reported that the security services will report girls or women attending house church services to their parents, telling that they were found mixing with men in an inappropriate situation. Shaming unmarried women is an effective way to stain their reputation and harm their social status, especially in conservative areas.

## WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

### Position on World Watch List (WWL)

The WWL 2019 score remained at 85 points, indicating extreme pressure on Christians. The country ranks 9th and no significant changes occurred during the reporting period compared to WWL 2018.

### Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Iran	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Weak
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Very weak
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).*

#### **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.

In the view of the government, and to a lesser extent the general society, ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim, and therefore ethnic Persian Christians are considered apostates. This 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.

#### **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.

**Organized corruption and crime (Medium)**

Imprisoned Christians – especially converts – are sometimes offered release 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 family’s 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.

**Denominational protectionism (Weak)**

Although the influence of this Persecution engine is categorized as weak, it is felt that the underlying issue needs explaining. The Iranian authorities like to highlight the presence of representatives of the Armenian and Assyrian churches in the media and in international settings to portray a positive impression of the country's religious tolerance. These church representatives make public statements about "the freedom all Christians enjoy", while in fact just a small section of the Christian community enjoy a very limited level of freedom. These statements are often used to delegitimize other Christian denominations (mostly Protestant converts from a Muslim background) who do not conform to the government's restrictions and who want to exercise their religious freedom to a greater degree.

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Iran	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	WEAK	WEAK	-	VERY WEAK	VERY STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	Medium	Weak	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Weak	-	Weak	-	-	Very weak	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Medium	-	Medium	-	-	Very weak	-	-
Political parties	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-

Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

*The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology (long version).*

### Drivers of Islamic oppression

Government officials are responsible for the many arrests and sentencing of Christians, especially converts from Islam. 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.

Within the current Iranian political spectrum there is a division between the Islamic left (Reformists) and the Islamic right ([Principlists](#)). 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 more 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.

Non-Christian religious leaders (e.g. local Muslim clerics) sometimes incite violence against minority groups. Although Iranian society is much more moderate compared to its leadership, religious families will often put pressure on family members converting from Islam to Christianity.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

Dictatorial paranoia and Islamic oppression are intertwined within Iran. Ousting other ideologies and religions helps the leading Iranian clerics maintain power and serves their aim of having a country ruled according to Shia Islam. According to [BTI 2018 Country Report Iran](#), Iran is de facto run by "a number of influential clerics and their family members [...] holding monopolies in lucrative areas of the economy (especially the import of certain goods)". The same report states that "the private sector only represents around 20% of the economy", indicating the big role of the state and the enormous (economic) interests of those in power.

### 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. It has been reported that some government officials use the system to [enrich](#) themselves.

## Drivers of Denominational protectionism

The Armenian and Assyrian ethnic Christian minorities have together three representatives in the Iranian parliament. They [depict](#) Iran as a free country where minorities have equal rights just as all other citizens. They go even as far as [praising](#) the Iranian government and security services for protecting other ethnic Christians abroad, while Christians in their own country are [sentenced to lengthy prison sentences](#). However, due to government pressure, this is probably the only way to survive as an ethnic Christian minority under the current regime.

## Context

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 of 1979. (However, 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.)

The government 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, combined with this strong ideology creates a totalitarian state.

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. 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. When the United States of America announced its withdrawal from the deal in May 2018 and reinstated sanctions, Iran's hardliners may well gain further political influence, blaming the moderates for trusting the arch-enemy in the first place.

## 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.

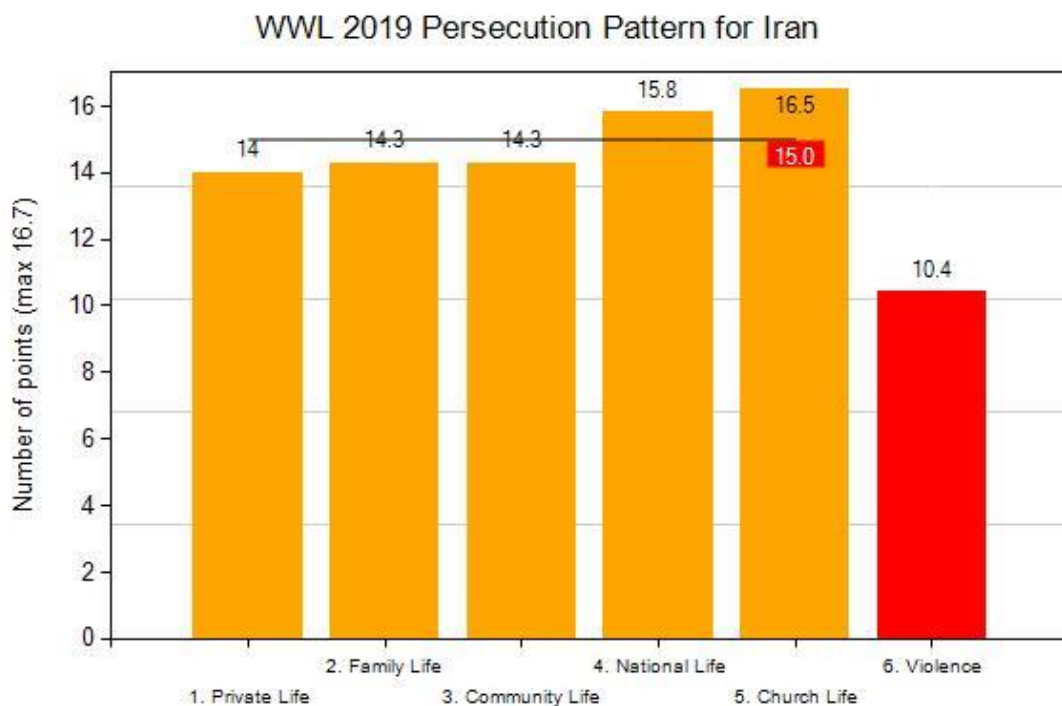
**Converts to Christianity:**

Converts from Islam to Christianity constitute the largest category in the country. 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 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 Persecution pattern for WWL 2019 shows:

- The average pressure on Christians stays at the same extremely high level (15.0), compared to WWL 2018. The Iranian government is exerting pressure on Christians on a large scale.
- Although all *spheres of life* show extreme levels of pressure, pressure is highest in *Church and National life*. This reflects that the pressure is mainly coming from the government. All church life is very much restricted, even for the officially recognized ethnic Christians, who are not allowed to evangelize or even to speak in Persian during their church services.
- The score for violence went up from 10.0 in WWL 2018 to 10.4 in WWL 2019. This increase was mainly due to taking into consideration the fact that Christian women are being forced to marry for faith related reasons (e.g. female converts who have to marry a Muslim husband).

#### **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 Farsi (Persian) – especially in 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 inheritance 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 and the educational system is in general heavily influenced by Shia doctrine.

#### **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:**

All Christians are banned from public offices, except for three seats reserved for ethnic Christians in parliament. There is no freedom of speech in Iran and criticizing the government can have severe consequences. Hate speech against Iranian Christians, especially Protestants, remained on a high level during the WWL 2019 reporting period in the form of multimedia material published by the government and anti-Christian rhetoric expressed by imams.

**Church sphere:**

Any Muslim who leaves Islam faces the death penalty. However, the only person who has been executed under apostasy laws was Pastor 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. 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. Officially, there are only three small Persian speaking churches left in the country. They are under close surveillance, 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 (Persian) are all illegal.

**Violence:**

During the WWL 2019 reporting period, most violence against Christians came from the government; at least 82 Christians were arrested or detained. 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 putting imprisoned Christians under [financial pressure](#) by demanding unreasonably high sums of money for bail.

For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

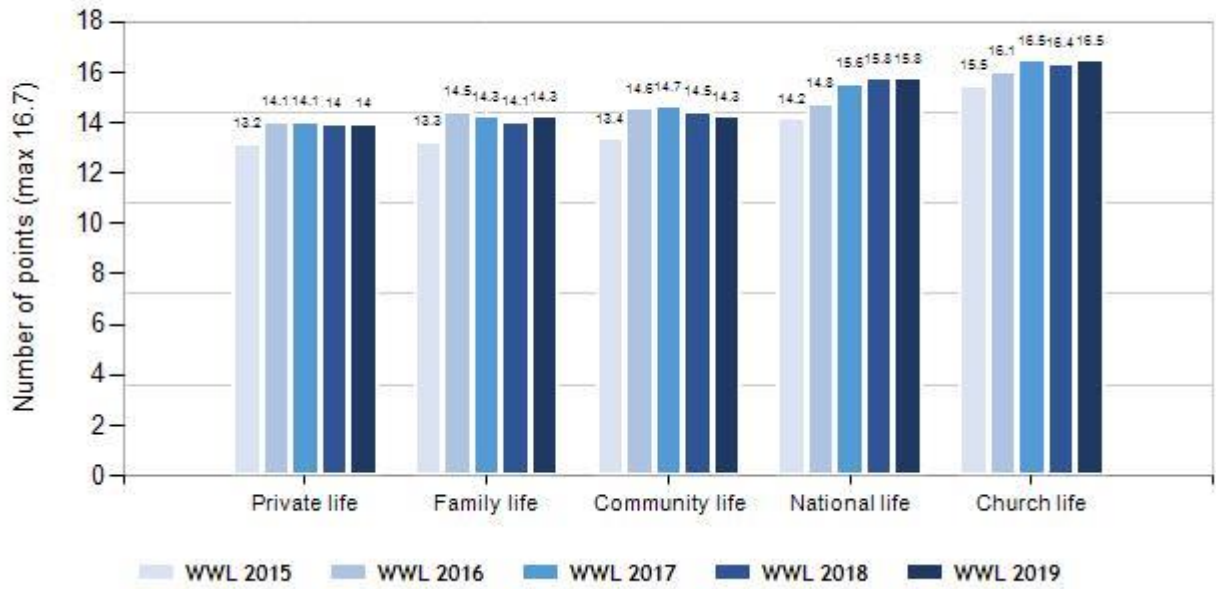
## 5 Year trends

The first chart below shows that the levels of pressure in the *spheres of life* have all been at an extreme level in the last five reporting periods. Whereas the levels of pressure in the *private, family and community spheres of life* have been more or less stable, there have been increases in the pressure in the *national and church spheres of life* which correspond with the increased pressure coming from the government side. The election of 'moderate' President Rouhani has not changed much in that regard.

The second chart depicts the scores for average pressure and shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has increased over the five years and has now reached a level (15.0) where the score is more or less stable. This might be a reflection of the continuing more violent crackdown on Christians carried out by conservatives after the (re)election of moderate President Rouhani.

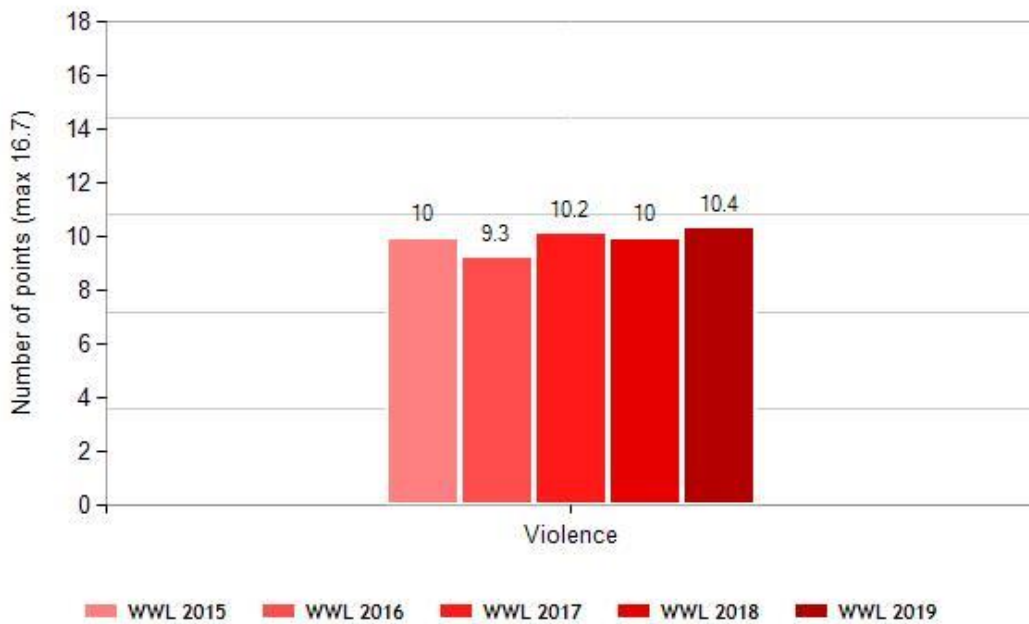
The score for violent incidents recorded in Iran has not changed dramatically over the last five reporting periods: It is fairly stable at the very high level of (just over) 10. The scores are mainly coming from incidents where Christians have been detained or sentenced, and where Christians' houses and house churches have been raided. In addition, many Christians, both from ethnic and convert background, fled the country because of persecution.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Iran (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Iran	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	15.0
2018	15.0
2017	15.0
2016	14.8
2015	13.9

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Iran (Violence)



## Gender specific 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 leaves Islam; especially since the arrest and imprisonment of females are culturally considered to be more worrying due to the possibility of sexual harassments by the security services.

It has been known for security services to report girls or women attending house-church services to their parents or family, telling them that they were found mixing with men in an inappropriate situation. Shaming (un)married women is an effective way to stain their reputation and harm their social status, especially in conservative areas. Since Iranian women are not free to travel on their own, fleeing a dangerous situation becomes problematic, as well as finding sheltered accommodation. This means that they are vulnerable to being exploited. If a female convert is also a mother, it is highly likely that the custody of the children will be taken from her; causing great pain for both mother and children.

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. Another reason could be the tendency in Islamic countries to see such women converts as 'misguided', needing showing the right path more than punishment. Forcing them to marry a Muslim husband is one of the methods used in this regard, although this does not seem to happen often.

In general, because the Iranian civil law is in accordance with Sharia law, women cannot take high public positions, such as becoming a judge.

### Male:

In the WWL 2019 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 led by women too. Men are also often the primary breadwinners for their families, especially if they have young children. When converting to Christianity, they risk losing their jobs, particularly if they have been arrested. This puts extra (financial) pressure on the families. When single Christian men are under particular stress through monitoring and harassment, they are likely to flee the country, which naturally impacts the family emotionally and financially.

In contrast with women, men are not seen as "misguided", but as willfully making wrong choices. Thus, their punishment is harsher and they are more likely to suffer physical abuse and torture. They face long term imprisonment and many are forced to migrate to the West, which weakens the Church, depriving it of experienced and mature leaders.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

Bahai, Sunni, Sufi (Dervish) Muslims and other religious minorities are also persecuted in Iran. No Christian has been killed by the regime for many years, most probably out of fear of the ensuing international consequences. However, many dissidents from other groups have been executed - mainly on charges of terrorism (instead of "apostasy"). Ethnic minorities such as the Kurds, Baloch and Iranian Arabs face suspicion and persecution from the government as well. Examples are:

- In March 2018, the Bahai community [reported](#) that at least 97 of their members were imprisoned at that time.
- In June 2018, Amnesty International [reported](#) the execution of a Sufi Muslim bus driver belonging to the Dervish community. According to this report, he was accused of using his bus to run over three police officers. He insisted that he was not even near the scene of the incident at that time.
- In September 2018, at least 20 adherents of Bahai were arrested by state security officers. Computers and literature were also confiscated. (Source: [Iran Human Rights Monitor](#), 27 September 2018).

## Future outlook

### The political outlook:

The conservative elements known as Principlists 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 (JCPOA) does not mean an end to the values of the revolution, is a crackdown on media, human rights and political activists. The pressure on Iranians holding dual nationality has increased due to their connections to foreign circles and businesses. Pressure has also increased on dissidents (including religious minorities) due to their political or religious convictions. These groups are considered a threat to the Islamic character of the republic. Part of this suppression is reflected in the increased number of arrests but also in smear campaigns against religious minorities, especially Christians and adherents of Bahai.

The development of more moderate policies may well be put on hold now that the USA are not part of the JCPOA anymore and sanctions have been re-instated. This will be a disappointment to the growing number of citizens who have lost their trust in the government and its Islamic doctrine. The ongoing and growing protests, even in rural and conservative areas, are a sign that the Iranian people want to see change. Recently, even [teachers were arrested](#) after a sit-in; and steel-workers were heard chanting protests in which Iran's rulers were referred to as "[thieves](#)". It would seem that a growing number of citizens do not just want to see more moderate policies being introduced, they want the whole political system changed. This is undermining the legitimacy of the regime. In response and out of fear that Iranians will lose their belief in the principles of the Islamic Revolution, the government is increasing its pressure on any group supporting an alternative to Shia Islamic ideology. In reaction to the radicalization evident among opponents to the regime, a counter-radicalization is developing amongst regime supporters. Thus, [a new generation of fierce hardliners](#) is emerging. 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 Iranian society is supporting the 'reformists'. However, this support may decline if Rouhani's policies do not deliver economic progress.

**The outlook for Christians - through the lens of:**

**Islamic oppression:** As long as the current Islamic regime keeps control of all government institutions and keeps a firm grip on the Iranian economy, it is unlikely things will really change in Iran. There is a positive development, in the sense that more and more Iranians do not trust the regime anymore and are openly calling for change. A move away from state religion towards a form of secularism might be an option - seeing as the influence of secularism is clearly growing - however, this influence is still too weak to expect any real change in the near future.

**Dictatorial paranoia:** As more interaction with the wider world becomes possible (via the internet and also through contact with the thousands of Iranians abroad), the security services are likely to intensify their monitoring. As a result, religious minorities such as Christians and adherents of Bahai are likely to be more closely watched - especially those with contacts to Western co-religionists. Christian media and websites in Farsi are reported to be particularly closely watched.

**Conclusion:**

Because of the huge power-base of the Principlists (which includes the army and Iran's Revolutionary Guard) and their connections with the judiciary, the outcome of the internal power-struggle is uncertain. Things are changing in Iran and - at least on paper - such developments could have a positive outcome for Christians and other minorities in the long term but for now persecution remains at an extreme level.

**External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics**

- Drivers of persecution: Principlists  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian\\_Principlists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_Principlists)
- Drivers of persecution: BTI 2018 Country Report Iran  
<https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/IRN/>
- Drivers of persecution: enrich  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/nov/28/iranian-judicial-authorities-attempt-arrest-of-mp-mahmoud-sadeghi>
- Drivers of persecution: depict  
<http://www.ishtartv.com/en/viewarticle,38499.html%20>
- Drivers of persecution: praising  
<http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13970626000424%20>
- Drivers of persecution: sentenced to lengthy prison sentences  
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/lengthy-sentences-for-iranian-pastor-and-two-converts/>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: undermine  
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/12/iran-church-retreat-centre-confiscated-for-being-funded-by-cia/>

- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: long prison sentences  
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/iranian-christians-sentenced-verdict-says-claiming-jesus-is-lord-is-attack-against-islam/>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: financial pressure  
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/iranian-christian-convert-released-bail-days-threat-indefinite-incarceration/>
- Gender specific persecution: especially vulnerable  
<https://preventforcedmarriage.org/forced-marriage-overseas-iran/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: reported  
<https://www.bic.org/focus-areas/situation-iranian-bahais/current-situation>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: reported  
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/iran-sufi-bus-driver-executed/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Iran Human Rights Monitor  
<https://iran-hrm.com/index.php/2018/09/27/persecution-of-bahais-iran-20-bahais-arrested-two-weeks/>
- Future outlook: teachers were arrested  
<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-teachers-arrested-summoned-for-strike/29604113.html>
- Future outlook: "thieves"  
<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-steel-workers-continue-protests-in-ahvaz/29636780.html>
- Future outlook: a new generation of fierce hardliners  
<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/iran-new-generation-innovative-revolutionaries-hardliners.html>

## Additional Reports and Articles

### WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

### Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

### Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).