



Iran

Christianity began to spread in Iran (formerly Persia) shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection. By 642 AD, when Arab Muslims overran the country, 25% of the population were Christian. Today, the number is estimated at less than 1%. Shi'a Islam is the state religion, and current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has reportedly vowed to "stop Christianity in this country".



An Iranian Christian, beaten by Iranian police

Persecution against Christians has increased in Iran in recent years to a point not seen since the early days of the Islamic revolution more than 30 years ago. Iranian authorities, concerned at the number of Iranian Muslims turning to Christ, have significantly increased the number of raids on church services, the harassment and threatening of church members, and the arrest and imprisonment of worshippers and church leaders. Even historic Christian groups recognised under Iran's constitution face more instances of discrimination and detention. Political and religious leaders have also made even more virulent and inflammatory statements against Christians.

Hundreds of Christians, mainly converts from Islam, have been arrested and detained throughout the country in the past few years. Some are subjected to intense interrogation and verbal and physical abuse. Some are eventually prosecuted, while others have to pay exorbitant sums for bail.

Although there is no official law against apostasy, leaving Islam, on the Iranian statute book, the constitution allows judges to draw on Islamic law and fatwas for their rulings in such cases, so a number of converts to Christianity have been charged with this offence. While sharia requires that an adult Muslim male apostate be put to death, the last time a Christian was officially sentenced and executed for apostasy was in 1990. However, several Christian converts from Islam who had been charged with apostasy were found murdered after their release.

The constitution of Iran formally recognises some Christian denominations as a protected religious minority who may worship freely. But in reality Christians are treated as second-class citizens and are subject to discrimination in many areas, such as education and government jobs and services.

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