



Written by [James Heiser](#) on February 8, 2011

Iranians Crack Down on Christian Churches

While Islamist extremism is advancing in Pakistan and Egypt, one of the bastions of the Jihadist ideology is facing a challenge its mullahs are having a hard time countering: the Christian Church is growing in Iran.

Just as a wave of persecution swept over the Christian minorities in other Muslim countries this past Christmas, Iran's Christian remnant has suffered terribly the past several months. [According to an article by Lisa Daftari at FrontPageMag.com](#), 70 Christians have been arrested since December, and further persecution is expected:



Since Christmas, reports say more than 70 of Iran's Christian minority have been taken into custody, making it the most significant and widespread attack on this minority group in Iran's history. State television reported that Tehran's governor, Morteza Tamadon, confirmed more arrests would be made.

In a series of government raids, grassroots Christian groups and organizations have been targeted for posing a threat to the government, which suspects these groups of attempting to convert Muslims and spreading Western influence.

The roundups have been specifically targeted toward Christian converts, one of Iran's three major Christian communities, consisting of the Armenian Christians who migrated to Iranian Azerbaijan in the 11th century, Assyrian Christians who have lived in Iran since the time of the Assyrian Empire, and a large and growing web of Christian converts who have left Islam and have converted to various sects of Christianity.

Christians are not the only victims of the latest round of persecution; Zoroastrians have also been subjected to similar treatment. But the spread of Christianity has clearly alarmed Muslim extremists, and the result has been a bloody crackdown. However, Iranian Christians have many generations of experience dealing with such oppression, and the government is discovering that the influence of the Internet and the difficulty of locating "house churches" can make it hard to find the new converts.

Iranian law contains constitutional provision which offers a few protections to those who are raised in the Christian faith; however, engaging in evangelism is punishable by death, and if someone who was raised in the Christian faith converts, for a time, to Islam, he is subject to the death penalty if he ever returns to the faith of his childhood. As Daftari explains:

Armenians and Assyrian Christians have certain rights and are recognized under the Iranian Constitution, but converting, or more specifically, the act of turning from Islam, is punishable by death. To leave the Islamic faith or to attempt to convert others away from the faith warrants capital punishment under Sharia Law. Under this law, a Muslim who becomes Christian is called a mortad, meaning one who leaves Islam. If the convert attempts to convert others, he is called a



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mortad harbi, or a convert who is waging war against Islam. Killing such a person is deemed a good deed and is the obligation of all Muslims, both according to the fatwa and reinforced in the Islamic Republic's penal code.

New Christians are therefore forced to print any books, pamphlets or other literature in covert fashion to avoid arrests. While Armenians can have Bibles printed in Armenian and services conducted in their language, converts are prohibited from printing Bibles or conducting Christian services in Farsi. This forces Christian Farsi speakers to practice in underground Church groups.

Apostasy — leaving Islam — is a capital offense in Iran, and this practice is upheld by the Iranian regime as being in conformity with the brutal tenets of Sharia law and the personal teaching of Mohammed. The Iranian regime has not hesitated to carry out such death sentences; according to a story published by GroundReport.com ("[Evangelical Christians Face Death in Iran](#)"), offers several examples of the persecution which confronts Christians in Iran:

Alireza Najafzadeh, 23, was arrested by the Iranian security forces and held in prison for several months. The Iranian government arrested Najafzadeh, on the charge of converting to Christianity and being a member of a local church. Mohabat New Agency reported that Iranian security force so severely tortured Najafzadeh that they had no choice but to release him. The young Christian man was released after he promised his captors he would not seek medical help for the numerous injuries he suffered at the hands of his interrogators. ...

An evangelical Christian pastor from the northern city of Rasht was arrested and convicted of apostasy. On November, 2010, an Islamic judge sentenced him to death by hanging. Another Christian convert, Ali Ghorabat, was executed on January 26, 2011.

Iran is far from the only Islamic nation which will execute citizens for leaving Islam; for example, [Pakistan's 2006 Apostasy Act](#) decrees the same punishment because "The sayings of the holy prophet ... is that he who leaves Islam and converts into another must be killed." In fact, such a penalty is [widely accepted](#) as in keeping with the teachings of Mohammed. Despite neoconservatives' dreams of reforging the Muslim world in their own image, [even Red Cross workers in Afghanistan](#) are not safe from such charges.

Despite such persecution, the churches still endure in the midst of Islam. Unlike in the West, where legal protections generally permit individuals to follow the dictates of their consciences as pertains to matters of religious belief, no such toleration is believed to be reconcilable with Islam. The recognition of this reality is not a call to crusade; it is a testimony to the precious liberties that are often taken for granted in the United States, and elsewhere.

Photo: In this photo taken on Dec. 25, 2010, Christians attend the Christmas Mass at the St. Grigor Armenian Catholic church in Tehran, Iran. Iran has arrested about 70 Christians since Christmas in a crackdown that demonstrates the limits of religious tolerance by Islamic leaders who often boast they provide room for other faiths: AP Images



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