

# Sufis (Muslims)

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Sufism refers to the spiritual and mystic dimension of Islam with the view that union with God is the ultimate truth and goal of religion. The expression ‘Sufi’ is likely derived from the Arabic word for wool, *suf*, and indicates the coarse woollen garments that were historically worn by Muslim ascetics. The word ‘Sufi’ as the common designation for Islamic mysticism is thought to have been used as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.

Sufi orders (*tariqa*) were especially significant in the spread of Islam along trade routes in West Africa and later into Central Asia and China. *Tariqa* are typically formed around spiritual masters who trace their teachings back to the Prophet Muhammad and what they consider the original intent of Islam. Some Sufi orders observe ecstatic practices, such as the physical exertions and whirling dance of dervishes in the Mevlevi Order.

Sufis have also made notable contributions to literature and poetry, in particular. Sufi poetry has left a significant legacy that has made Islamic philosophy and spirituality known to a readership well beyond the Muslim world. For instance, Jalaladdin Rumi, a Persian Sufi of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is one of the most widely read poets in the Western world.

The nature of Sufism makes it impossible to obtain reliable statistics of how many Muslims self-identify as Sufis in the world today. Sufis have had a deep and enduring influence on Islam across many countries and cultures for more than a millennium. However, relatively few Muslims would name themselves as Sufi per se.

## Teachings

Sufism places particular importance on the acquisition of spiritual truth through the cultivation of the inner life of the believer. The student (*murid*) engages in the pursuit of self-discovery and spiritual practices with the help of a guide. Sufi masters can teach different methods for pursuing this path, but the ultimate goal remains the same: finding divine truth at the heart of one's being.

Classical Sufi teaching recommends the repetition of the names of God as a way to deepen prayer. Certain ascetic disciplines, such as fasting, are also encouraged for focusing one's attention on God. Rituals, such as the hypnotic dance of dervishes, are intended to join body, mind, and spirit to arrive at a deeper state of consciousness and a passionate longing for the divine.

Sufi shrines are dedicated to various saints and poets across the Muslim world. Pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) to these holy sites and commemorations are part of Sufi practice. This serves as a regular remembrance of the inevitability of death, leaving *murids* to reassess their lives and guiding them to live more mindfully in this earthly existence.

Sufism is also associated with more progressive Islamic attitudes toward social and cultural development, human rights, and non-violence. As consciousness of God pervades one's entire life, the desire for transformation occurs not only on a personal level but also for society and the world. For instance, Sufis have historically supported the right to education for women and women's wider participation in society. Additionally, Sufism is regarded as a peaceful religious path which opposes the use of violence and any degrading treatment.

Sufism has met opposition in Muslim-majority countries that have strong public resistance to religious and cultural pluralism.

### **IRAN: Reasons for the Persecution of Sufis**

In July 2018, the US government estimated the population of Iran to be 83 million. These same statistics estimate the Muslim population to be 99.4% with 90-95% identifying as Shia and 5-10 % Sunni. There are no official statistics available on the number of Muslims who practice Sufism, although unofficial reports estimate several million.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Iran 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/>.

Freedom of religion or belief in Iran continues to face serious challenges, in contravention with the country's constitutional guarantees and international commitments, including under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Iran's Shia Islamist rulers view Sufi Muslims as heretics. The government of Iran, seeking to maintain power and national unity through the propagation of a single religious-political ideology, has responded to Sufism with repression for decades.

Furthermore, Sufi teachings have sometimes been interpreted as a challenge to the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and as a call for separation of religion and state. Dervishes of the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi order<sup>2</sup> have been particularly targeted by Iranian authorities and are subjected to excessive security surveillance, unfair trials and lengthy prison terms.

Other Iranian Sufis have faced arrest, intimidation, and the destruction of their houses of worship. As they are not specifically recognised by constitutional law, they are generally considered to be a 'false cult' (*Fergh-e Zale*), and, therefore, susceptible to persecution.

### Sufis in Prison in Iran

All of the Sufis/ Dervishes documented in HRWF's Prisoners' Database were arrested in February 2018 during the 'Golestan Haftom' incident in Tehran. Several hundred Sufis gathered in front of the home of their 90-year-old spiritual leader, Noor Ali Tabandeh, to express solidarity with him for facing heightened security monitoring. The Iranian police and forces of the Revolutionary Guard's Basij faction disbanded the peaceful gathering and opened fire on them. The clashes lasted several days and left three policemen and at least one protester dead, and more than 170 hospitalised.<sup>3</sup>

#### Sufis behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **7 cases** of detained Sufis in its Prisoners' Database.<sup>4</sup> Over 200 Sufis were arrested and sentenced to prison terms to be

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<sup>2</sup> The order is named after its 14th century CE founder Shah Nimatullah (Nūr ad-Din Ni'matullāh *Wali*), who settled in and is buried in Mahan, Kerman Province, Iran, where his tomb is still an important pilgrimage site. The number of Sufis was estimated to be between 50,000 and 350,000 before the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Due to the repression by the Islamic regime, many emigrated to Europe and the United States.

<sup>3</sup> "Mass Conviction of Sufi Protesters 'Unprecedented in Iran's Judicial History,'" Center for Human Rights in Iran, August 21, 2018. <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/08/conviction-of-16-sufi-protesters-unprecedented-in-irans-judicial-history/>.

<sup>4</sup> Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Sufis, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

followed by a period of internal exile at the time of the ‘Golestan Haftom’ incident in February 2018. Many are still serving their exile sentence.

Most of the Sufis who served time due to this incident were sentenced to between five and seven years in prison, but some were sentenced to over 10 years. One individual is serving a 23-year prison sentence. In addition to prison time, some of their sentences included more than 70 lashes.

### **Articles of the Penal Code**

Prisoners are typically charged under these sections of the Iranian Penal Code:

**Paragraph 500** - propaganda against the system.

**Paragraph 607** - disobeying police orders.

**Paragraph 610** - assembly and collusion against national security.

**Paragraph 618** - disruption of public order.<sup>5</sup>

### **International advocacy**

On 7 March 2018, soon after the violent crackdown, 24 Members of the **European Parliament** published a public appeal condemning the massive repression of the Gonabadi Dervishes and their spiritual leader in Iran:

The Members of the European Parliament, appeal to Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to immediately address this issue with the Iranian authorities and call for full respect of human rights and prisoners’ rights, for the right of freedom of religion and belief, the right for freedom of assembly, the right for freedom of thought as set out in international conventions.

The MEPs further call on Hassan Rohani, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Sardar Rahimi, Chief of police in Tehran to immediately halt this systematic violence, imprisonments and intimidation against all Sufis in Iran, and more specifically the Gonabadi Sufi Order followers and sympathisers and demand the immediate release of detainees who have been imprisoned because of their beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, due to the secrecy of the regime, there is no other information publicly available regarding the Iranian Penal Code.

<sup>6</sup> “Urgent Public Appeal of the European Parliament Condemning Repression of Gonabadi Dervishes,” preservehumanrights, March 7, 2018.

<https://preservehumanrights.org/2018/03/urgent-public-appeal-of-the-european-parliament-for-gonabadi-dervishes/>.

In June 2018, when Mohammad Salas, a Gonabadi Dervish Sufi, was executed for participating in the February ‘Golestan Haftom’ demonstration, the office of MEP Gérard Deprez, Chair of the **Friends of a Free Iran in the European Parliament**, issued a strong statement of protest. He called upon the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and the European Parliament President Antonio Tajani ‘to immediately condemn this brutal act of barbarity that has been carried out by the Iranian regime’.<sup>7</sup>

In its 2020 annual report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) stressed that most of the Sufis arrested in February 2018 and sentenced to heavy prison terms remained in detention. USCIRF recommended that the US State Department:

- re-designate Iran as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom;
- impose targeted sanctions on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the US under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- press for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience;
- and reauthorize and ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the US.<sup>8</sup>

## CASE STUDIES

### *Mass arrest of several hundred Sufis in February 2018*

On 19 February 2018, several hundred Gonabadi Dervishes, both men and women, gathered outside the residence of their 90-year-old spiritual leader, Noor Ali Tabandeh, in Tehran. They were protesting the authorities’ intensified persecution of their community and were attempting to prevent his possible arrest.

The Iranian police and forces of the Revolutionary Guard’s Basij faction disbanded the peaceful gathering and opened fire on them. The clashes lasted

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<sup>7</sup> “Strong Condemnation of the Brutal Execution of Mohammad Salas by Iran Regime,” National Council of Resistance of Iran, June 18, 2018, accessed June 2020. <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/strong-condemnation-of-the-brutal-execution-of-mohammad-salas-by-iran-regime/>.

<sup>8</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2020, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Iran*, 2020. [https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Iran\\_2.pdf](https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Iran_2.pdf).

several days and left three policemen and at least one protester dead, and more than 170 hospitalised.<sup>9</sup>

Noor Ali Tabandeh remained under house arrest without an official explanation from the government. In November 2019, he began a hunger strike. Consequently, he needed to be hospitalised but was denied access to his doctors and advisors. After severe medical malpractice, he died in December 2019.

Noor Ali Tabandeh had appointed Alireza Jazbi as his successor, but Mohammed Tabandeh, his nephew who has links with Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, contested Jazbi for leadership. Mohammed Tabandeh had the assistance of an anti-Sufi cleric with close connections to senior Iranian government officials.<sup>10</sup>

While exact numbers of February 2018s mass arrest can't be confirmed, according to reports 382 Sufis were arrested, out of which 11 were women. Many of the detained were brutalised by the authorities and denied medical care, some were killed, and over 200 were sentenced to prison terms. One person by the name of Mohammed Salas was reportedly hanged for allegedly killing one of the policemen, a confession extorted under torture.<sup>11</sup> Of those sentenced to jail, four are former administrators and collaborators of the Majzoooban-e-noor Dervish news site.<sup>12</sup> The Sufi-operated website posts articles pertaining to the Gonabadi Order.<sup>13</sup>

Those convicted were sentenced to several years in prison, ranging from two to 26 years. In addition, some were sentenced to: lashes ranging from 74 to 144, exile to a designated province in the country, a ban on civic activities and/or travel, or a combination of all these additional sentences. The convicted Sufis argue that they were denied a fair trial.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Mass Conviction of Sufi Protesters 'Unprecedented in Iran's Judicial History,'" Center for Human Rights in Iran, August 21, 2018, accessed May 2020.

<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/08/conviction-of-16-sufi-protesters-unprecedented-in-irans-judicial-history/>.

<sup>10</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2020, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Iran*, 2020.

[https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Iran\\_2.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Iran_2.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> "Mass Conviction of Sufi Protesters 'Unprecedented in Iran's Judicial History,'" Center for Human Rights in Iran, August 21, 2018, accessed May 2020.

<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/08/conviction-of-16-sufi-protesters-unprecedented-in-irans-judicial-history/>.

<sup>12</sup> "Verdict Bulletin on 202 Gonabadi Dervishes," Hrana, November 5, 2018.

<https://www.en-hrana.org/verdict-bulletin-on-202-gonabadi-dervishes>.

<sup>13</sup> نور مجزوبان "شد قطعی گنابادی درویش ۲۳ برای حبس ماه سه و سال ۱۹۰ / اندنکرده شرکت دادگاه در که زندانی درویش ۲۳ حکم تأیید" - گنابادی درویش فرهنگی خبری مستقل پایگاه - accessed June, 2020.

<https://majzoooban.org/fa/index.php/2016-01-06-22-22-54/18619-2019-03-12-14-18-51>.

<sup>14</sup> "Iran Appeals Court Upholds Lengthy Prison Sentences, Lashings Against 23 Dervishes," Center for Human Rights in Iran, March 15, 2019, accessed May 2020.

<https://iranhumanrights.org/2019/03/iran-appeals-court-upholds-lengthy-prison-sentences-lashings-against-23-dervishes/>.

### ***Mostafa Abdi sentenced to 26 years and 3 months in prison***

**Mostafa Abdi** was one of the Dervish Sufis detained and sentenced following the violent police crackdown in February 2018. Mostafa Abdi was an editor for the official Dervish website: Majzooban. He received the harshest sentence of 26 years in prison, 148 lashes, two years of exile in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, a two-year ban on social activities and a two-year prohibition on traveling abroad.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Sufi woman sentenced to prison time and 148 lashes***

**Elham Ahmadi** was arrested on 20 February 2018 during a protest demanding the release of the Sufi leader Noor Ali Tabandeh from house arrest. Her husband, Jafar Ahmadi, was arrested a day before her and sentenced to 7 years in prison.

In January 2019, Elham Ahmadi was sentenced to 148 lashes for speaking out about the denial of medical treatment and poor living conditions in the Gharchak Prison where she is currently serving her five-year prison sentence. The verdict was issued by Branch 1145 of the Criminal Court under the charges of ‘publishing falsehoods’ and ‘insulting agents carrying out their duties’. These accusations were based on a lawsuit brought against Elham Ahmadi by the head of the prison because she had claimed that a fellow inmate was not being given proper medical care.

Although Elham Ahmadi has been released from prison, she is currently serving her exile sentence.<sup>16</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The Iranian government considers Sufis to be non-Muslims and heretics. However, for centuries, Sufis have contributed to the development of Persian culture and are today part of Iran’s social fabric. The Iranian Constitution fully guarantees their rights as citizens under Article 14, which declares that ‘the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity and to respect their human rights’. Even if they are not

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<sup>15</sup> “Long Prison Terms for Editors of Dervish News Outlet in Iran,” VOA News in Iran, August 17, 2018, accessed June 25, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> “Sufi Woman Jailed in Iran Sentenced to 148 Lashes For Criticizing Gharchak Prison Conditions”, Center for human rights in Iran, January 14, 2019, accessed June 26, 2020.

<https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2019/01/sufi-woman-jailed-in-iran-sentenced-to-148-lashes-for-criticizing-gharchak-prison-conditions/>.

considered to be Muslims, it is legally required that they be treated with respect and tolerance.