



IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
Radicalism and Reform in Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran Democracy Monitor 195

May 6, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman**

Related Categories: Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Science and Technology; Terrorism; Iran

IRAN'S WAR ON CHRISTIANITY

Earlier this month, Iran's Intelligence Minister, Mahmoud Alavi, disclosed that his agency had deployed operatives and assets to actively counter "advocates of Christianity" active within the country. The Ministry is also seeking to intimidate prospective converts, and has "summoned" individuals who have expressed an interest in learning more about the Christian faith for invasive interviews and interrogations. These steps are apparently being driven by worries that Iranian Muslims have begun converting to Christianity in increasing numbers as support for the country's ruling regime and its guiding ideology has begun to flag. (*Radio Farda*, May 4, 2019)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Even though the Iranian constitution recognizes in principle a number of other faiths (including Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism), in practice the country's ideological regime has proven itself to be deeply antagonistic to them. Scores of Christian leaders have been detained, imprisoned and intimidated over the past four decades by the country's religious authorities. The Iranian regime has also banned the publication of Farsi-language editions of both the Old and New Testaments – and has meted out death sentences for Iranians who convert from Islam to other religions.]

MICROSOFT MOVES AGAINST IRANIAN HACKERS

Tech giant Microsoft is clamping down on Iranian hacking activity. The company reports that it has "seized" nearly one hundred websites that have been utilized by Iranian-origin hackers to carry out cyberattacks and cyberespionage against Western targets. The activity of "Phosphorus," a hacking group which Microsoft has reportedly been tracking for more than half-a-decade, includes phishing schemes that attempt to gather information from defense industry insiders, journalists and activists, both in the U.S. and in the Middle East. (Associated Press, March 28, 2019)

IRAN'S IMPLODING ECONOMY

Mounting economic pressure on the Iranian regime on the part of the Trump administration is having a pronounced effect on conditions within the Islamic Republic. According to the International Monetary Fund, the Iranian economy shrank by nearly four percent in 2018, and is expected to constrict by another six percent this year. "Clearly the re-imposition of sanctions and the removal of the waivers will have additional negative impact on the Iranian economy both in terms of growth and in terms of inflation, where inflation could reach 40 percent or even more this year," Jihad Azour, who directs the IMF's Middle East and Central Asia department, has forecast. (*Riyadh Al Arabiya*, April 29, 2019)

TEHRAN SEEKS GULF WARGAMES

The Iranian regime is responding to the Trump administration's recent elimination of sanctions waivers for buyers of Iranian crude by seeking to expand its military presence in the Strait of Hormuz, a key regional waterway through which one-fifth of global oil traffic passes. Rear-Admiral Hossein Khanzandi, the commander of Iran's Navy, has said that the country is planning to soon hold joint military wargames with Russia near the Strait in a not-so-subtle signal to foreign audiences that the Iranian regime has the ability to close the waterway in the event of further escalations of hostilities with the United States. According to Khanzandi, the wargames - which have yet to be formally confirmed by the Kremlin - will take place "in the southern waters of Iran," proximate to where Russia's naval contingent in the country is berthed. (*Iran Front Page*, April 29, 2019)