



A man in Santa's costume at Vank Cathedral, an Armenian church in Esfahan, December 2023

Hundreds Try To Enter Church In Iran To Celebrate Christmas

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Hundreds of Iranians rushed to an Armenian church in Esfahan on Sunday to celebrate Christmas, which has become popular among Muslims over the past two decades.

Videos posted on social media depict a large crowd, mainly composed of young non-Christians, trying to enter the historic Vank Cathedral. This cathedral is a major tourist attraction in the city, but on that day, it had to close its doors to the public an hour earlier than usual. Later, the police used force to disperse the youths who were singing and dancing in the street outside the church.

There was no Christmas service held at the cathedral, because unbeknownst to those who had gathered outside, Armenians celebrate the birth of Christ on January 6, following the tradition of Eastern Orthodox Christians.

Crowd trying to force doors of Vank Cathedral open and chanting "Open the door, Jesus!"

For several years, pundits have suggested that the rising popularity of Christmas in an Islamic country like Iran is a collective response to the government's attempts to promote Shiite mourning ceremonies over the celebration of happiness in society. This has also led to a growing disregard for ancient Iranian festivals such as Nowruz (New Year), Yalda (Winter Solstice Festival), and Charshanbeh Souri (end of year bonfire festival), all of which are traditionally associated with joyous celebrations.

“What is important to people is life and happiness. [Celebration of Christmas and other western holidays] is...a reaction to traditional [Shiite] culture,” **philosopher and university professor Bijan Abdolkarimi told local media** in 2020.

Like Valentine's Day and Halloween, the popularity of Christmas has been on the rise among Muslim Iranians in the past two decades.

Photos published by Iranian media this year show shop windows with beautifully decorated Christmas trees, Santa Clauses, and Christmas accessories, as people, even women in long black veils and their children, taking selfies with the decorations.

Police using violence against a man watching young people's dance outside Vank Cathedral

Arguing that celebration of Christmas by Muslims has nothing to do with seeking the truth of Christianity or the actual celebration of the birth of Christ, Abdolkarimi called the reaction of the Iranian society “a means of expressing disgust and hatred” of the prevalence of religious dogmatism and control.

For hundreds of years, Esfahan, Iran's third-largest city after Tehran and Mashhad, has been home to a large Armenian community and over a dozen historical churches.



Vank Cathedral in the New Julfa district of Esfahan (Isfahan), December 2023

Like some other historical Armenian and Assyrian churches in other parts of Iran, the Vank Cathedral, established in 1606 in Esfahan's historical New Julfa District, is open to the public on certain days.

Most contemporary churches, however, do not open their doors to non-Christians, particularly during worship, for the fear of being accused of encouraging conversion of Muslims to Christianity. Conversion from Islam could bear a death sentence to the convert.

Armenians are the biggest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran. There are around 120,000 Armenian and Assyro-Chaldean Christians in Iran. **Unlike converts to Christianity**, they enjoy some degree of freedom of worship and have their own representatives in the parliament.

Importing Christmas accessories, mainly from China, has been banned for several years and what is on offer in shops is illegally imported. Iranian media have for several **years reported that Muslim families buy most of these commodities**.

“There is an unwritten rule [about selling Christmas accessories] ... They may say that it is preaching Christianity...We are always in doubt. We do not know what is legal and what is not,” **the owner of a shop in Tehran told Ensaf News** when asked about getting into trouble for selling Christmas accessories.