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Austrian Centre for Country of Origin
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Iran:

House churches; situation of practising
Christians; treatment by authorities of
Christian converts' family members

Query Response [a-10094]

14 June 2017



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REPUBLIK ÖSTERREICH
BUNDESMINISTERIUM FÜR INNERES



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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to ACCORD as well as information provided by experts within time constraints and in accordance with ACCORD's methodological standards and the Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI).

This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status, asylum or other form of international protection.

Please read in full all documents referred to.

Non-English language information is summarised in English. Original language quotations are provided for reference.

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1 Organization, structure and functioning of house churches

The Journal Chrétien, a French-language Christian news website, notes that 20 officially recognized churches exist in Iran (Journal Chrétien, 1 November 2016), while the Iranian government is quoted as saying that there are “more than 20 active, half-active and historical churches” (HRC, 26 May 2016, p. 17).

According to Journal Chrétien, Protestant communities in Iran include the Presbyterian Church of Iran, the Assyrian Evangelical Church (Tehran), the Armenian Evangelical Church, the Assyrian Pentecostal Church (Tehran and Urmia) and the Church of Iran (Journal Chrétien, 12 January 2017).

A June 2014 fact-finding-mission report of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) quotes Mansour Borji, an advocacy officer with the Article 18 initiative of the London-based United Council of Iranian Churches (Hamgaam), as saying that the house church movement came into existence around 2002 and gradually expanded as a result of government pressure on existing churches (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 35).

Sources note that Protestant “house churches” are illegal in Iran (RNZ, 23 December 2016; HRC, 26 May 2016, p. 17). In his May 2016 report to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the (then) UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, quotes the Iranian government as saying that the running of house churches is illegal since they have not obtained the necessary permits from the authorities (HRC, 26 May 2016, p. 17).

The June 2014 Danish Immigration Service (DIS) report quotes an international organisation in Turkey as saying that it did not know the number of house churches in Iran but that they were numerous due to government pressure on Evangelical and protestant churches existing above-ground, although it did not consider that the number was on the rise. Similarly, Mansour Borji of the Article 18 initiative is quoted as saying that it was very difficult to estimate the number of house churches and that accurate numbers do not exist. (DIS, 23 June 2014, pp. 21-22)

The same report quotes Mansour Borji of the Article 18 initiative as saying that house churches exist all over Iran (including in places like Mashad and Qom), with the international organization in Turkey indicating that the cities of Tehran, Rasht, Shiraz and Isfahan appear to have large numbers of house churches (DIS, 23 June 2014, pp. 21-22).

The June 2014 DIS report quotes the international organisation in Turkey as saying that the majority of house churches do not exist over the long term and frequently change locations and members:

“This is also due to the monitoring that the churches face which compels them to close down and open up new churches in new locations. It would be hard to keep the same house church running for two years for example because of their risks of monitoring by the authorities.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 21)

Due to the official churches' heavy surveillance by authorities, the Journal Chrétien states in its November 2016 article, many Christians meet in house churches consisting of eight to twelve members. As soon as membership rises to about twelve persons, a new house group is formed:

“Seules 20 églises sont officiellement reconnues et elles sont étroitement surveillées par le gouvernement. De nombreux chrétiens se retrouvent ainsi obligés de se rencontrer dans les églises de maison constituées de 8 à 12 membres. Dès qu'elles atteignent environ 12 personnes, un autre groupe de maison naît, ce qui aide l'Évangile à se répandre.” (Journal Chrétien, 1 November 2016)

A March 2017 email response from a representative of Elam Ministries, a UK-based Iranian Christian group that engages in missionary work in Iran, provides the following comments on the structure of house churches in Iran:

“[D]ue to the underground nature of these house churches, the structure is not uniform across the country. Some house churches are very informal and are simply a gathering of close family and friends on a regular or semi-regular basis for prayer, worship and bible reading. These may be very small groups (a couple of people, for example) or larger (a couple of dozen or more perhaps). Often house churches grow organically as new Christians share their new faith with family and friends. Many house churches will have no formal links with any other Christian groups. However, some house churches are part of house church 'networks' within a particular city or area, or some networks even span across a number of cities.

Some house churches have leaders who have been able to receive training and teaching from Christian ministries (either online or in person through residential courses provided outside of Iran), whilst other house church leaders may have had no opportunity to receive training at all. An increasing number of house churches have 'internet pastors': where the pastor has had to flee the country due to persecution, they may continue to lead the church remotely via the internet.

However the pressure and persecution on house churches in Iran means there are an increasing number of isolated Christian in Iran: Christians who do not have regular contact with other Christians. In most cases, these isolated Christians mostly receive their teaching via Christian TV programmes, which they can access by satellite. They may also receive teaching and encouragement and a form of fellowship via the internet.” (Elam Ministries, 28 March 2017)

With regard to training of house church leaders, the same Elam Ministries representative adds in a June 2017 email response:

“[B]ecause of the hostile environment inside Iran, there are not many opportunities for Christians to receive Christian leadership or theological training in the country. Therefore, various Christian ministries provide training opportunities for Iranians in countries near to Iran.” (Elam Ministries, 13 June 2017)

A May 2016 article of the Christian Post, a nondenominational, Evangelical Christian newspaper based in Washington, D.C., states with reference to the Pars Theological Centre, a London-based group that promotes Christianity among Persian speakers:

“[D]ue to the fear of government crackdown, Iranian house churches consist only of about four to five members, and have to change their place of gathering every time they meet.”
(Christian Post, 3 May 2016)

The June 2014 DIS report quotes Mansour Borji as describing the workings of house churches that are part of a house church network:

“The source further said that some house church groups are connected to a network (through their pastors) and some are not. Some groups come across the message of Christ through satellite TV. Others come across information on the internet and share it with close friends and relatives and then form a group. According to the source, there are certain security guidelines for those who are members of a house church connected to a network, one of which is not to form groups bigger than 12-15 members. The guidelines further secure that the leaders of a network is not known to the individual members of a house church group.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 22)

The June 2014 DIS goes on to state:

“A non-governmental organization in Turkey explained that it seems that the house churches are usually linked to churches outside Iran through the house church leaders. [...]

Elam Ministries said that the Iranian authorities do not use their resources on new believers as their priority is to stop the formation of house churches. [...]

It was added that for a house church to function well, it needs to be part of a network. It was explained that a pastor might minister four or five groups, i.e. house churches, and therefore actually be a leader of a network of house churches. The different groups or house churches will not know of one another’s existence.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, pp. 26-27)

The UK-based NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is quoted by the DIS as saying that it did not have information as to the size of house church networks and that it was difficult to obtain insight into this issue due to the secretive nature of the house church movement (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 23).

The Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung (RNZ), a German regional newspaper, states that no baptisms are performed in Iran’s underground house churches. These churches do not have church leaders and often lack bibles. Members of house churches have little knowledge about biblical teachings and may not even know the Lord’s Prayer (RNZ, 23 December 2016).

As the Christian Post notes, the Pars Theological Centre provides Christian religious instruction to its students in Iran, mostly through video lectures, workbooks, and digital resources. Students work at home using offline computers but are in contact with teachers/tutors via email, which allows them to submit assignments and receive feedback. The Christian Post refers to the Pars Theological Centre as saying that its students sometimes meet in small groups to

discuss the content of lessons. These discussions are led by a “senior student”. Since the students need to keep “extreme security measures”, these gatherings all take place underground. While these meetings do include prayer and worship, these need to be done “very quietly and without attracting attention”. (Christian Post, 3 May 2016)

A June 2014 DIS report quotes a number of sources as describing practices of house churches:

“Regarding the types of activities that take place in a house church gathering, CSW said that it would include normal church activities but that it would take place with care. [...]

Elam Ministries explained that a house church basically starts one to one: for example, a family may become interested in Christianity and get into contact with Elam or other Christian ministries working with Iranians, by way of satellite programs typically, and Elam will put them in contact with a Christian family who will teach them. Converts know by instinct that security is an issue and Elam also instructs them that they should not meet in groups larger than ten. If a person, or a family group, who is interested in Christianity wants to get into contact with a house church, he or she/the family group may be taught one to one for some time and then enter a house church. The sorts of activities that go on in a house church include teaching of the bible as well as prayer and worship. It is often done quietly so as not to arouse suspicion from neighbors. Gradually such a fellowship becomes a house church as it grows and evolves.

When asked how such a house church leader can get resources needed for his fellowship, Elam explained that there are different networks working in Iran, and that Elam is only one of the missions. However, Elam has a lot of resources and therefore other ministries do come to Elam for resources that they may need and Elam does not ask questions.

Regarding the activities of the house churches, a non-governmental organization in Turkey informed the delegation that according to their information provided by the refugees, converts meet mainly for prayer and singing. According to the knowledge of the organization, there are no missionary activities connected to the house churches. Most Iranians are introduced to the house church movement through friends or family members who have converted.

An international organization in Turkey observes that house churches are not necessarily well versed in Christianity, and are essentially community-building initiatives by informal evangelical leaders who are familiar with church doctrines to varying levels.

With regard to the nature of the house churches, the source considered that a house church group may change the setting of the house church, choose to stop meetings for a while and once restarting activities, pick a new place to meet. The leader of such a group could be a pastor, however not necessarily. House churches more often have a communal nature rather than a hierarchal one.

Regarding the number of persons in a house church group, the source considered that it could vary, however it would likely be less than 15 people so as not to attract too much attention, but it could also be up to 30. It was added that it is hard to give a number and

that a house church gathering would sometimes be a picnic in a park and it could include from five to 25 individuals. [...]

With regard to ways of coming into contact with and becoming a member of a house church, Mansour Borji explained that potential members are kept under surveillance for many months. A house church group may start with a group of family and friends and not before three months later will the group be connected to a network. The source found that within the last four to five years, due to the pressure on the house churches, it has not been easy for an outsider to become a member of a house church and gaining the trust of a house church. Many groups have therefore been limited to family and friends, but at the same time the movement is Evangelical which means that the members feel an obligation to share their faith with others. When asked how an individual can get acquainted with a house church or with Christians in general, CSW considered that house churches today are a little more careful in terms of who they introduce to their groups. [...]

Asked about the diversity among the Iranian Farsi-speaking Christians with regard to religious outlook, Mansour Borji informed the delegation that there are various Protestant and Evangelical 'branches', including Pentecostal, Brethren, Episcopalian, Baptist and Presbyterian churches. [...]

An international organization in Turkey considered that the Pentecostal movements are the strongest of the Evangelical movements in Iran." (DIS, 23 June 2014, pp. 23-24)

2 Situation/rights of practising Christians (including the situation of Christians after the closure of Assemblies of God [AOG] church

In her March 2017 report to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Asma Jahangir, expresses her concern with regard to the "targeting and harsh treatment" of religious minorities including Christian converts from Islam whose faiths are considered as "deviant" by the authorities and parts of the clerus. The situation of these religious groups is described as follows:

"These groups continue to face arbitrary arrest, harassment and detention, and are often accused of national security crimes such as 'acting against the national security' or 'propaganda against the state.' Under Iranian law, individuals, including Christians of Muslim backgrounds, can be prosecuted for the crime of apostasy although the crime is not specifically codified as a crime in the Islamic Penal Code. The Special Rapporteur notes that apostasy laws clearly contravene Iran's obligation to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief." (HRC, 6 March 2017, p. 19)

The February 2017 Amnesty International (AI) Report 2016/17 states that during the reporting year 2016, "[t]he authorities detained tens of Christian converts after raiding house churches where they peacefully gathered to worship" (AI, 22 February 2017).

The Christian Post quotes a member of the Christian NGO International Christian Concern as saying that the Iranian government has referred to evangelical Christians as a threat to national

security, viewing them as being supported by foreign “enemies” (Christian Post, 16 November 2016).

BosNewsLife, a Budapest-based Internet news agency covering issues relating to persons of Christian and Jewish faith worldwide, quotes a number of human rights groups as reporting on the treatment of Christians in Iran:

“A group of 19 influential human rights groups have urged the United Nations and the international community to help protect Christian converts in Iran saying scores of believers were detained for leaving Islam. In a statement to BosNewsLife the activists said that the ‘Islamic Republic of Iran’ has been ‘homing in on converts from a Muslim background’. [...]

Between May and August 2016 security forces arrested at least 79 Christians, according to activists, family members and friends. ‘The majority of those arrested were interrogated and detained for periods ranging from a few days to months.’ the groups said. ‘At the time of writing some of these 79 Christians remain in detention and have still not been formally charged.’ Rights groups say ‘the true number of Christians apprehended by the authorities could be notably higher’ as ‘many’ arrests would have gone unreported. In 2012, Iran's government began to bar converts from Muslim backgrounds from attending services in official churches. Instead Christian converts ‘are forced’ to gather in informal groups known as ‘house churches’, the activists said. ‘These gatherings are considered illegal by authorities and are often raided. In August 2016 alone security agents allegedly raided at least four house churches and the house church members were arrested and interrogated.’ [...]

The individuals responsible for the house church often face charges of ‘acting against national security through the establishment of house churches’, BosNewsLife and activists established. [...]

Iranian authorities have pressured Christian leaders to emigrate, either through direct threats or through intentional harassment, according to Christian activists familiar with the situation. Some church leaders were reportedly told during interrogation that they would face 5 to 10 years imprisonment unless they leave the country. [...] In other instances Christians said that harassment meant ‘daily summons to security offices for questioning, confiscation of documents such as identity cards’ to prevent the victim from buying or selling property or cars, ‘or forcing the Christians out of their jobs.’” (BosNewsLife, 3 December 2016)

A January 2016 article of the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle (DW) provides a brief overview of the situation of Christians in Iran, quoting Markus Rode, a member of the Christian foundation Open Doors, as saying that the situation of Iranian Christians regardless of their denomination is “very dramatic”. As regards Armenian and Chaldean churches, the article says, they are “allowed to hold services, as long as they are not conducted in Persian, and they are observed by the police”. (DW, 25 January 2016)

The same article mentions that “Distributing Christian literature in Farsi is strictly forbidden, in order to prevent evangelization” and goes on to say the following about house churches and the treatment of Christian converts by the state:

“‘The traditional churches are being strangled,’ Rode told DW. ‘Those involved have no other choice but to go underground.’ Many Christians form small house churches and meet in private homes. [...]

Both Rode and Matthias Vogt, Islam and Middle East expert with the aid organization missio, say the situation is gravest for converts to Christianity. Muslims who choose to become Christians are threatened with prison sentences and even death. Many Iranians believe that Muslims remain Muslims even after converting and that Muslims are not permitted to enter a Christian house of worship. ‘The pressure on the churches is high,’ Vogt told DW.” (DW, 25 January 2016)

The US Department of State (USDOS) 2015 report on international religious freedom, which was published in August 2016 and covers the year 2015, notes that while Iran’s constitution recognizes Christians as one of the “religious minorities who, ‘within the limits of the law,’ have permission to perform religious rites and ceremonies and to form religious societies”, activities such as public religious expression, persuasion and conversion are “considered proselytizing and are punishable by death”. The report states that “[t]he penal code stipulates the death sentence for moharebeh (‘enmity against God’) and sabb al-nabi (‘insulting the prophets’).” The report goes on to note that religious activity is monitored by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) and that churches were additionally monitored by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Churchgoers are required to register with the authorities. While registration affords certain rights such as the use of alcohol for religious means, “[f]ailure of churchgoers to register and attendance at churches by unregistered individuals may subject a church to closure and arrest of its leaders by the authorities”. (USDOS, 10 August 2016, section 2)

The same report describes the situation of Muslim converts to Christianity and Protestant/evangelical church leaders as follows:

“Muslim converts to Christianity reportedly continued to face harassment, arrest, and detention. According to UN reports, on April 15 [2015], the Shahin Shahr Revolutionary Court upheld the one-year prison sentence and two-year travel ban of 13 Christian converts who were arrested in 2013 at a house church and were charged with ‘propaganda against the State,’ ‘advocating for evangelical Christianity,’ and ‘establishing house churches.’

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the police arrested 14 Protestants on November 10, in Varamin. Most of them were members of the Protestant Emmaus Church in Tehran, which authorities had forced to close in 2012 for conducting services in Farsi. There was no reported information on the charges leveled against the 14.

Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year’s end. [...]

The authorities often arrested members of house churches on accusations of supporting and accepting assistance from enemy countries. The authorities released Behman Irani, a leader of the non-Trinitarian group called 'The Church of Iran,' for two weeks on bail in July but then returned him to prison to serve out the remaining portion of his six-year sentence for 'creating a network to overthrow the system.' [...]

Christians, particularly evangelicals and converts, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to reports from exiled Christians. Many arrests reportedly took place during police raids on religious gatherings, during which the authorities also confiscated religious property. Prison authorities reportedly continued to withhold medical care from prisoners, including some Christians, according to human rights groups.

The government continued to regulate Christian religious practices closely. [...] Those found to be hosting worship meetings in their homes were arrested.

According to human rights NGOs, the government also continued to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing. The authorities reportedly barred all nonmembers from entering church premises, closed churches, and arrested Christian converts. They reportedly continued to press evangelical church leaders to sign pledges saying they would not proselytize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services. Meetings for evangelical services remained restricted to Sundays. Christian advocacy groups stated the government, through such pressure and through church closures, had eliminated in recent years all but a handful of Farsi-language church services, restricting most services to the Armenian and Assyrian languages. Pastors of forcibly closed Farsi-language churches continued to report pressure from the government to leave the country, and the government prevented ordination of new ministers. Security officials remained posted outside congregation centers to perform identity checks on worshippers. Christians of all denominations reported the presence of security cameras outside their churches to confirm non-Christians did not participate in services. In response, many Protestants and other converts practiced their religion in secret." (USDOS, 10 August 2016, section 2)

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a US governmental body for monitoring religious freedom abroad, notes in its April 2016 annual report which covers events up to March 2016 on the situation of Christians including converts from Islam:

"Over the past year, there were numerous incidents of Iranian authorities raiding church services, threatening church members, and arresting and imprisoning worshipers and church leaders, particularly Evangelical Christian converts. Since 2010, authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained more than 550 Christians throughout the country. As of February 2016, approximately 90 Christians were either in prison, detained, or awaiting trial because of their religious beliefs and activities.

Some Christians were released from jail during the year, including two long-serving prisoners of conscience, Saeed Abedini (released in January 2016) and Farshid Fathi (released in December 2015). [...]

During the reporting period, human rights groups inside Iran reported a significant increase in the number of physical assaults and beatings of Christians in prison. Some activists believe the assaults, which have been directed against converts who are leaders of underground house churches, are meant to intimidate others who may wish to convert to Christianity. In December 2015, authorities raided a number of private Christmas services and arrested nearly a dozen church members in Tehran.” (USCIRF, April 2016)

The June 2014 Danish Immigration Service (DIS) fact-finding-mission report describes the situation of Protestant and evangelical churches in Iran:

“When considering the major recent changes in Iran when it comes to conditions for Christians, an international organisation in Turkey mentioned that authorities have reportedly continued to put more pressure on the AOG [Assemblies of God] churches. Initially, the authorities demanded that churches provide the names of the church-goers. Recently, the churches have been closed, with the excuse of renovation. When asked if any AOG churches in Iran remained open, the source stated that most are closed or have been closed at some point. Whether or not some of the AOG churches, for example the one in Rasht, have been reopened is unknown to the source. [...]

With regard to the current situation of existing Protestant and Evangelical Churches in Tehran and other cities in Iran, Mansour Borji informed the delegation that the Iranian authorities shut down the last three churches offering Farsi services in Tehran last year (in 2013). The source further explained that the Emmanuel Presbyterian Church and St Peter’s Evangelical Church in Tehran were the last two official churches offering Farsi-language services. There are still a few churches in Rasht, Shiraz and Esfahan with a very small congregation but according to the source, the church in Rasht for example is closely monitored and the pastor is obliged to make regular reports to the authorities. They are not allowed to baptize or accept new Farsi-speakers into membership. The source concluded that there are essentially no churches offering services in Farsi over ground anymore. [...]

In May 2013, the Central Assemblies of God Church in Tehran, Iran’s largest Persian language Evangelical church, was forcibly closed down and all its activities ceased. Prior to closure of the Central AOG Church in Tehran in May of 2013, the security forces arrested the pastor, Robert Asserian, and the church and his home were raided. The contents of AOG church library was confiscated by the authorities. Several books and other Christian literature in Farsi was taken away by the security forces and never returned. The pastor is still awaiting trial. The source said that many pastors are forced to leave Iran as they are pressured by the authorities through threats to family members, for example kidnapping of family members, rape of their daughters and similar violence.

The source said that since 2010, the Iranian authorities’ actions against the Farsi-speaking churches have intensified. The source was of the opinion that the Iranian National Security Council at that time had made a decision to stop Farsi-speaking churches. In late 2010 and early 2011, the demands against the churches started and finally in 2013 the largest remaining churches were shut down.

According to the source, the task of implementing the decision taken by the National Security Council was handed to the Special Intelligence Branch of the Revolutionary Guard which has taken charge of dealing with Iranian Farsi speaking churches and converts to Christianity. [...]

Elam explained that underground house churches in Iran are growing due to the fact that most Christians with a Muslim background are unable to go to the (Evangelic and Protestant) churches that exist over ground. [...] Currently, the main AOG church in Tehran has been shut down as have other AOG churches in Iran and some of their pastors have been forced to leave Iran. [...]

Two AOG Churches remain open, one of which is in Rasht. The St. Emmanuel church in Tehran has also closed its services recently and this is the case with St. Peters Church in Tehran as well. Not many churches provide services in Farsi anymore. The AOG church in Rasht still has services in Farsi, however it does not allow new members into its church. Elam added that Rasht has traditionally been a more liberal area which can explain why this church remains open. Whether Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox any church that starts up with activities in Farsi, will face trouble with the Iranian authorities. The fact that the government shuts down the churches that do exist over ground, has led to the growth of house churches working under ground. It was explained that by closing the churches, the authorities control the situation of churches that exist over ground and are pushing converts to congregate in illegal churches, i.e. house churches.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, pp. 32-34)

The June 2014 DIS report informs about the treatment of persons who participate in house church gatherings:

“The authorities are believed to be monitoring those who gather in house churches and people who participate may be at risk of arrest and detention by the authorities according to AIIS [Amnesty International International Secretariate]. It was added that even if the authorities were not going after ordinary members of house churches, it is highly likely that they have many members under surveillance. [...]

Since 2010, the authorities have created an environment of fear within the house church communities according to Mansour Borji. The authorities have made efforts towards collecting intelligence about the house church communities and towards eliminating the resources in the communities and conducted raids against the gatherings of house churches.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 25)

The Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), a New York-based human rights organisation working on Iran, states that in February 2017, two Iranian converts to Catholicism (a mother and her son) have been arrested by intelligence agents of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in West Azerbaijan Province. The same report mentions that in August 2016, the Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) arrested “a Christian and four Christian converts near Tehran”. (CHRI, 6 March 2017)

A March 2017 report of the UN Secretary-General to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) notes:

“In December [2016], the largest Persian-speaking Protestant community in the country, Jama’at-e Rabbani [Assembly of God] announced that its ownership of Sharon Gardens, in the city of Karaj, had been confiscated. Charges of espionage were reportedly brought against this community, and in July 2015, Branch 3 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court ordered the confiscation of its premises. This decision was upheld by the Appeals Court in August 2016.” (HRC, 13 March 2017, p. 15)

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) notes that agents of the IRGC conducted a series of raids on Christian homes in Rasht in May 2016. In November 2016, four men who were arrested during these raids, Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, Yasser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie and Mohammed Reza Omid (Youhan), were charged with “action against national security”, an offence that carries a maximum punishment of five to six years in prison, CSW says. Earlier, in October 2016, three of these men, Mossayebzadeh, Fadaie and Omid, were sentenced to 80 lashes each for consuming wine during religious service. As CSW notes, “[t]he three have appealed against the sentence and a hearing at the 11th Branch of the Appeal Court has been scheduled for 9 February 2017” (CSW, 30 November 2016). No information could be found on whether the appeal hearing scheduled for February 2017 has taken place.

A July 2016 Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) press release provides the following details about the arrests carried out by the MOI (incorrectly referred to here as “VEVAK”) in Rasht in May 2016:

“Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that Yousef Nadarkhani, the Church of Iran pastor acquitted of apostasy in 2012, has been charged with acting against national security. According to CSW’s sources, Pastor Nadarkhani was summoned to the 13th Branch of the Revolutionary Court in Rasht on 24 July, where he was charged and released, but was given a week to raise 100 million Touman (approximately US\$ 33,000) in bail or face arrest. He was also accused of being Zionist and informed that he had no right to evangelise. On 13 May [2016], the pastor and his wife, Tina Pasandide Nadarkhani, were arrested after Iranian Security Service (VEVAK) officers raided their home in Rasht as part of a series of raids targeting approximately ten Christian households. While they were released immediately, three members of their congregation, Mohammadreza Omid (Youhan), Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie, were detained in Lakan Prison near Rasht and released after posting bail amounting to approximately US\$ 33,000.” (CSW, 25 July 2016)

An earlier May 2016 CSW press release elaborates on the Nadarkhani case:

“This was also the second time that Pastor Nadarkhani has been re-arrested since his release from prison in September 2012. He was initially arrested in 2009 after going to his children’s school to question the Muslim monopoly on religious education, which he felt was unconstitutional. He was charged with apostasy and sentenced to death in 2010, a decision that was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2011. On 8 September 2012, he was released from prison following his acquittal on apostasy charges, but was found guilty on charges of evangelising. The pastor was recalled to prison on 25 December 2012 to

complete the remainder of his three year sentence, and was released once again on 7 December 2013.” (CSW, 15 May 2016)

The (then) UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, in his May 2016 report to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), states that “[d]ozens of persons were reportedly detained in prisons in the Islamic Republic of Iran as of January 2016, many for involvement in informal house churches” (HRC, 26 May 2016, p. 17).

A January 2016 CHRI press release notes that officials of the MOI in Isfahan arrested a Christian convert a few days prior to Christmas 2016 and took him to an unknown location. The CHRI goes on to say with reference to Mansour Borji of the Article 18 initiative:

“Borji noted that in the past ten years it has become common for security agents to arrest Christian converts in various cities around Christmas. ‘By making these arrests around this time the government hopes to intimidate converts by threatening them with heavy punishments... so that they would either leave the country or stop their [religious] activities.’

A year before, on December 26, 2014, Pastor Victor Bet Tamraz, a former leader of the Tehran Pentecostal Assyrian Church, along with two converts, were arrested in Tehran. He was also released on bail after two months in detention in Evin Prison.” (CHRI, 4 January 2016)

3 Treatment by state authorities of Christian converts’ family members

A representative of Elam Ministries, in an email response of March 2017, notes the following with regard to the treatment of family members of Christian converts by state authorities:

“We can certainly confirm that family members of Christians (especially Christian converts) are not spared suffering. For example, in one case of a house raid and arrest of a Christian couple perpetrated by Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) in July 2014, the 12-year old son of the couple was at home during the house raid. He was hit by the officers while being questioned about his own faith. He was also arrested along with his parents. Further, we have heard examples of elderly parents being harassed regarding their child’s conversion to Christianity.” (Elam Ministries, 28 March 2017)

Two groups of UK parliamentarians, the Christians in Parliament All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) and the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, write in a March 2015 joint report:

“Often the MOIS [Ministry of Intelligence] particularly target Christian leaders, but family members of the individual can also find themselves targeted for harassment. For example, threats were faced for many years by a Christian internet pastor called Farhad, according to Elam Ministries. Farhad had learnt that the MOIS knew about his involvement in the distribution of Christian scriptures and books, which would provoke a harsh punishment. After a Christian friend of his was arrested and interrogated, Farhad feared he too would soon be arrested, and he decided to leave Iran. Following Farhad’s departure, Farhad’s elderly mother, and his sister and brother-in-law have continued to face threats on an

almost daily basis. They have also had to relocate to another city because agents of MOIS informed the local community that they are ‘apostates’ from Islam.” (Christians in Parliament APPG/APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, March 2015, pp. 5-6)

The same report notes that the pastor Behnam Irani and his family were “subjected to significant trauma and stress” as the pastor, who was imprisoned in 2011, received 18 fresh charges in 2014:

“A further way that the judiciary can intimidate Christians is by applying fresh charges to prisoners. Behnam Irani (a pastor imprisoned since 2011) received eighteen new charges in 2014. Thankfully these were subsequently dropped, but not before the pastor and his family had been subjected to significant trauma and stress.” (Christians in Parliament APPG/APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, March 2015, p. 10)

The March 2017 email response by Elam Ministries notes that family members of imprisoned Christians are also affected in ways other than direct actions by state actors:

“Of course the family members of those in prison for their faith suffer deeply through loss of their loved one. For example, Pastor Farshid Fathi was in prison for 5 years between 2010 and 2015. His son was about 1 years old when his father was imprisoned for his faith. He was without his father for over 5 years and had no memory of his father when he was finally released. Many families also suffer financially when the primary breadwinner is imprisoned. For example, Ebrahim Firouzi is currently imprisoned for his faith in Rajai Shahr prison (Karaj) and his sister and mother are struggling financially because he was the primary breadwinner for the family. Families suffer severely financially in other ways. Extortionate bail sums are demanded for the temporary release of Christian detainees. Often family house deeds or family business permits are submitted to cover this bail demand. If the Christian flees the country before their court hearing, the bail is lost to the family. Moreover, inheritance laws in Iran mean that Christian family members cannot inherit money from relatives. Muslim family members are always preferred to receive the inheritance. There are many other ways that family members suffer because of the conversion of an individual.” (Elam Ministries, 28 March 2017)

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