



Home Office

# **Country Information and Guidance**

## **Iran: Christians and Christian Converts**

**Version 2.0**

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# Preface

This document provides country of origin information (COI) and guidance to Home Office decision makers on handling particular types of protection and human rights claims. This includes whether claims are likely to justify the granting of asylum, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave and whether – in the event of a claim being refused – it is likely to be certifiable as ‘clearly unfounded’ under s94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers must consider claims on an individual basis, taking into account the case specific facts and all relevant evidence, including: the guidance contained within this document; the available COI; any applicable caselaw; and the Home Office casework guidance in relation to relevant policies.

## Country Information

The COI within this document has been compiled from a wide range of external information sources (usually) published in English. Consideration has been given to the relevance, reliability, accuracy, objectivity, currency, transparency and traceability of the information and wherever possible attempts have been made to corroborate the information used across independent sources, to ensure accuracy. All sources cited have been referenced in footnotes. It has been researched and presented with reference to the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), dated April 2008, and the [European Asylum Support Office’s research guidelines, Country of Origin Information report methodology](#), dated July 2012.

## Feedback

Our goal is to continuously improve the guidance and information we provide. Therefore, if you would like to comment on this document, please [e-mail us](#).

## Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

The Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to make recommendations to him about the content of the Home Office’s COI material. The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office’s COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy.

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Information about the IAGCI’s work and a list of the COI documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector’s website at <http://icinspector.independent.gov.uk/country-information-reviews/>

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# Guidance

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Basis of Claim

- 1.1.1 Fear of ill-treatment amounting to persecution at the hands of the Iranian authorities due to :
- their religion; or
  - their conversion to Christianity; or
  - because they actively seek to convert others to Christianity.

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## 2. Consideration of Issues

### 2.1 Is the person's account credible?

- 2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see sections 4 and 5 of the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 2.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).
- 2.1.3 Decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing if there is reason to doubt an individual's true place of origin. (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

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### 2.2 Are Christians at risk of mistreatment or harm in Iran?

#### Those born into the Christian religion

- 2.2.1 The Iranian Constitution recognises Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities. However the state does discriminate against them on the basis of religion or belief, as all laws and regulations are based on unique Shi'a Islamic criteria. It is difficult for many Christians to live freely and openly in Iran. Such discrimination is prevalent throughout Iran.

#### Christian Converts

- 2.2.2 Christians who have converted from Islam are at risk of harm from the state authorities, as they are considered apostates - a criminal offence in Iran. Sharia law does not allow for conversion from Islam to another religion, and it is not possible for an individual person to change their religious affiliation on personal documentation. Christian converts face physical attacks, harassment, surveillance, arrest, detention, as well as torture and ill-treatment in detention. The country guidance case of [SZ and JM \(Christians – FS confirmed\) Iran CG \[2008\] UKAIT 00082](#) (12 November 2008) found that conditions for converts to sacrament-based churches may be such that

they could not reasonably be expected to return to Iran. This remains the case.

### Evangelical/House Churches

- 2.2.3 Members of evangelical/house churches are subject to harassment, arrest, close surveillance and imprisonment by the Iranian authorities. Christians who can demonstrate that in Iran or in the UK they have and will continue to practise evangelical or proselytising activities because of their affiliation to evangelical churches or who would wear in public outward manifestations of their faith such as a visible crucifix, will attract the adverse notice of the authorities on return to Iran and will be at risk of persecution.
- 2.2.4 In cases where it is found that the person will be discreet about their religion on return, the reasons for such discretion need to be considered in the light of [HJ \(Iran\)](#). A person should not be expected to conceal aspects of their religion, their conversion or their activities relating to the conversion of others if they are not willing to do so. However, if the person would choose to conceal aspects of his or her religion or religious activities for reasons other than for a fear of persecution then the person would have no basis for their claim for international protection.
- 2.2.5 Since President Rouhani's election in 2013, imprisonment of Christians has increased. The attitude and treatment of the Iranian authorities towards 'ordinary' Christians may result in ill-treatment which in individual cases may reach the level of persecution, torture or inhuman and degrading treatment. Where Christians can demonstrate that they have come to the attention of the authorities previously for reasons other than their religion, then that in combination with their religion, may put them at real risk of persecution. Each case will need to be considered on its facts.

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### 2.3 Are those at risk able to internally relocate within Iran?

- 2.3.1 As this category of claim concern's a fear of ill treatment by the state authorities, relocation to a different area of the country to escape this threat is not viable.

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### 2.4 If refused, is the claim likely to be certifiable?

- 2.4.1 Where a claim falls to be refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.
- 2.4.2 For further information on certification, see the [Appeals Instruction on Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#).

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### **3. Policy summary**

- 3.1.1 Christianity is an officially accepted religion according to the constitution. However, Iran is an Islamic theocracy whose citizens do not enjoy religious freedom.**
- 3.1.2 The treatment of people born into the Christian religion (e.g. Assyrians and Armenians) by the state may result in ill-treatment which in individual cases may reach the level of persecution, torture or inhuman and degrading treatment, particularly if the person has come to the adverse attention of the authorities for reasons other than their religion. Each case will need to be considered on its facts.**
- 3.1.3 Members of Evangelical and house churches, and those who actively seek to evangelise others and engage in proselytising activities are at real risk of persecution in Iran and a grant of asylum is likely to be appropriate.**
- 3.1.4 The right of Muslims to change their religion is not recognised under Sharia law. The religious conversion of Muslims is illegal in Iran. Christians who have converted from Islam are at real risk of persecution in Iran, and a grant of asylum is likely to be appropriate**
- 3.1.5 Where a claim falls to be refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as ‘clearly unfounded’ under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.**

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# Country Information

## 4. Religion in Iran

### 4.1 Overview

#### 4.1.1 According to the U.S Commission on International Religious Freedom's, 2015 Annual Report:

'Poor religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate in 2014, particularly for religious minorities, especially Baha'is, Christian converts, and Sunni Muslims. Sufi Muslims and dissenting Shi'a Muslims also faced harassment, arrests, and imprisonment. Since President Hassan Rouhani assumed office in August 2013, the number of individuals from religious minority communities who are in prison because of their beliefs has increased. The government of Iran continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. While Iran's clerical establishment continued to express anti-Semitic sentiments, the level of anti-Semitic rhetoric from government officials has diminished over the past year.'<sup>1</sup>

#### 4.1.2 According to the World Watch List 2015, published by Open Door, an international ministry serving persecuted Christians and churches worldwide, Islam is the official religion of Iran, and its laws must be in line with Islamic law.

#### 4.1.3 According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), a Christian organisation working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights, in the pursuit of justice:

'Since the 1979 revolution, Iran's religious and ethnic minorities have suffered increasing human rights violations. Religious minorities are viewed with suspicion and treated as a threat to a theocratic system bent on imposing a strict interpretation of Shia Islam. Although Iran is party to several international covenants that provide for freedom of religion or belief, several Christians, Bahais, Sufi Dervishes and Sunni Muslims have been killed judicially and extra-judicially, tortured, imprisoned or generally harassed on account of their faith. The persecution of Muslim converts to Christianity has been escalating since 2009. This has been accompanied by a rise in anti-Christian rhetoric from senior official leaders. The Bahai community, which remains unrecognised, has also experienced increasing hate speech.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2015: Iran, 1 May 2015 <http://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Iran%202015.pdf> [accessed 10 November 2015]

<sup>2</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Iran profile, undated, [http://www.csw.org.uk/our\\_work\\_profile\\_iran.htm](http://www.csw.org.uk/our_work_profile_iran.htm) [date accessed 10 November 2015]

## 4.2 Religious Demography

### 4.2.1 The US Department of State 2014 International Religious Freedom Report estimated:

'...the population at 80.8 million (July 2014 estimate). Muslims constitute 99 percent of the population; 90 percent are Shia and 9 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds living in the northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest, respectively). There are no official statistics available on the size of the Sufi Muslim population; however, some reports estimate that several million Iranians practice Sufism.'

'Groups constituting the remaining 1 percent of the population include Bahais, Christians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis. The three largest non-Muslim minorities are Bahais, Christians, and Yarsanis. Bahais number approximately 300,000 and are heavily concentrated in Tehran and Semnan. According to UN data, 300,000 Christians live in the country, although some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) estimate there may be as many as 370,000. The Statistical Center of Iran reports there are 117,700.'

'The majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan. Unofficial estimates of the Assyrian Christian population range between 10,000 and 20,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical groups. Christian groups outside the country estimate the size of the Protestant community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestants reportedly practice in secret. Yarsanis, mainly located in Luristan and Gurani-speaking areas of southern Kurdistan, have often been classified by the government as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism. Yarsanis, however, identify Yarsan as a distinct faith (known in Iraq as Kaka'i). There is no official count of Yarsanis, but one NGO and some leaders in the Yarsani faith estimate there are up to one million. There are from 5,000 to 10,000 Sabean-Mandaeans. The Statistical Center of Iran estimated in 2011 that there were approximately 25,300 Zoroastrians, who are primarily ethnic Persians; however, Zoroastrian groups report 60,000 members. Similarly, Iranian census statistics in 2012 reported there were fewer than 9,000 Jews, while media estimate there are as many as 25,000.'<sup>3</sup>

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## 4.3 Legal Framework

### 4.3.1 The US Department of State in its 2014 International Religious Freedom Report stated that:

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<sup>3</sup> US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, 14 October 2015, Section I. Religious Demography <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238454> [date accessed 11 November 2015]



'The constitution declares the "official religion is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'afari Shiism." It states all laws and regulations must be based on undefined "Islamic criteria" and official interpretation of sharia.'<sup>4</sup>

'The constitution states that the five major Sunni schools of Islam are also to be "accorded full respect" and enjoy official status in matters of religious education and certain personal affairs, including marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The constitution states that, in regions where followers of one of the five Sunni schools constitute the majority, local regulations are to be in accordance with that school, within certain bounds. The constitution states that "within the limits of the law," Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities with protection to worship freely and to form religious societies, although proselytizing by them is prohibited. Although the Sabean-Mandaeans do not consider themselves Christians, the government regards them as Christians and thus includes them among the three recognized religious minorities. The government does not recognize any other non-Islamic religion, and adherents of these other religious groups, such as the Bahais, do not have the freedom to practice their beliefs.'<sup>5</sup>

'The constitution does not provide for the rights of Muslim citizens to choose, change, or renounce their religious beliefs. The government considers a child born to a Muslim father to be a Muslim and deems conversion from Islam to be apostasy, which is punishable by death. Non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression, persuasion, or conversion of Muslims. Such activities are considered proselytizing and are punishable by death. The penal code stipulates the death sentence for "sabb al-nabi," insulting or cursing Islamic prophets.'<sup>6</sup>

'The government maintains a legal interpretation of Islam that forces citizens of all faiths to follow strict rules, justified on the basis of religion, that effectively deprive women of many rights granted to men. The government enforces gender segregation throughout the country without regard to religious affiliation. Women of all religious groups are expected to adhere to "Islamic dress" in public; this includes covering their hair and fully covering the body in loose clothing. Although enforcement of rules for such conservative dress eases at times, the government periodically punishes "un-Islamic dress."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, 14 October 2015, Section II Legal Framework <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238454> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>5</sup> US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, 14 October 2015, Section II Legal Framework <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238454> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>6</sup> US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, 14 October 2015, Section II Legal Framework <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238454> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>7</sup> US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, 14 October 2015,

4.3.2 The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran report 'The Cost of Faith – Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran' published 16 January 2013 noted that:

'Under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Iran is obligated to safeguard freedom of religion. While Iran's constitution recognises Christianity and, to varying degrees grants them many of the rights found in the ICCPR, in practice the government does not uphold these international and constitutional protections for its Protestant community. Measures systematically undertaken by the Iranian government, which include restricting church attendance, forbidding the formation of new churches, closing churches, restricting the distribution of bibles and Christian literature, harassing and monitoring church groups, arresting, detaining and prosecuting church leaders, criminalizing evangelism and coercing Christians to return to Islam, are prohibited by the ICCPR.'

'Christians' right to free expression in Iran, guaranteed under international law and also given in Article 24 of the Iranian constitution, is also routinely denied. Article 19 (2) of the ICCPR guarantees "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression," and the Human Rights Committee overseeing implementation of the ICCPR notes that free expression includes the right to express "religious discourse." As a corollary right, Article 18 of the ICCPR protects the right to "prepare and distribute religious texts or publications".'

'Article 6 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights protects the right to work. As such, the state must prevent discrimination in the workplace. Among the most common forms of discrimination experienced by Iranian Christians is employment discrimination, both by the state and by private sector employers. Interviewees reported to the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHR), an independent New York-based non-profit organisation that aims to promote human rights in Iran through research and international media advocacy, that they were dismissed from jobs or refused employment because of their faith. Employers appear particularly sensitive to converts. Employment application forms for both the private and public sector always require applicants to report their religion and family names often allow most Iranians to be able to instantly infer whether or not someone is from an ethnic Christian, Muslim or other background. Christians can also face obstacles starting a business or obtaining business loans and permits. In some instances, particularly in government, employment discrimination is codified in law. Iran's constitution requires that certain public officials be Muslim, including the Supreme Leader, the President, Judges and all MPs with the exception of the five slots designated for minority religious communities.'<sup>8</sup>

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Section II Legal Framework

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238454> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>8</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, The Cost of Faith – Persecution of Christian

## 5. Christians

### 5.1 Overview

- 5.1.1 The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) report published in January 2013 titled 'The cost of faith- Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran' noted that:

'Broadly speaking, Iranian Christians can be grouped into two categories: ethnic and non-ethnic. Ethnic Christians include the Armenians and the Assyrians (or Chaldeans), who possess their own linguistic and cultural traditions. Most are members of their community's Orthodox church (the Apostolic Church of Armenia and the Assyrian Church of the East<sup>5</sup>) but some are also Catholics or Protestants. Non-ethnic Christians are for the most part members of Protestant churches, and most are converts who once personally identified as Muslim or came from Muslim backgrounds.'<sup>9</sup>

- 5.1.2 Iran Focus reported in September 2014 that: 'Iran's traditional Christian communities, such as Orthodox Armenians and Assyrians, are protected under the Islamic Republic's constitution as so-called People of the Book. Their daily lives are subject to various legal restrictions, however, their schools and church activities are closely watched, and they cannot lead most public institutions.'<sup>10</sup>

- 5.1.3 A May 2015 thematic official report of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs states that:

'the Iranian authorities generally do not interfere with the religious practices of Christians belonging to the "old" recognized affiliations. As long as these groups refrain from evangelizing, they are generally not targeted by the authorities solely on grounds of their faith. Christians of the "old churches" usually belong to the same ethnic group and are members of the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant church. Armenian and Assyrian Christians live in closed social communities and do not engage in proselytizing activities.'<sup>11</sup>

- 5.1.4 The ICHRI states that authorities have granted ethnic Christians some rights to religious practice, such as holding their church services, running religious

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Protestants and Converts in Iran – 16 January 2013, Executive Summary

[http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/01/cost\\_of\\_faith/](http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/01/cost_of_faith/) [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>9</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, The Cost of Faith – Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran – 16 January 2013, Christianity in Iran

[http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/01/cost\\_of\\_faith/](http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/01/cost_of_faith/) [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>10</sup> Iran Focus, A Christian prisoner in Iran, 30 September 2014,

[http://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=29845&catid=5&Itemid=110](http://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=29845&catid=5&Itemid=110) [accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>11</sup> Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD), Iran: Freedom of Religion; Treatment of Religious and Ethnic Minorities: COI Compilation, September 2015, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5609522a4.html> [accessed 17 November 2015]

schools and celebrating their major religious holidays, though they are not permitted to hold Persian language services.<sup>12</sup>

5.1.5 Minorities at risk assessment of Christians in Iran noted that:

‘Although Iran's 1979 Constitution recognizes Armenians and Assyrians as official religious minorities, this recognition in effect assigns them second-class citizenship. Armenian Christians are allowed to follow their own religion's laws in matters of marriage and inheritance, and are somewhat restricted in the educational instruction of Armenian and must pass Islamic theology tests in order to attain public sector positions. Smaller Christian minorities have not received official recognition and have, at times, been persecuted. Instances of harassment have included conspicuous monitoring outside Christian premises by Revolutionary Guards to discourage Muslims or converts from entering church premises, and demands for presentation of identity papers of worshipers inside.’<sup>13</sup>

5.1.6 The Guardian reported in May 2014 that:

‘Iran's Christians have traditionally been ethnic Armenians and Assyrians who are able to practice their religion freely as long as they do not proselytize. In the last five to 10 years however, satellite television has ushered in a new era of Iranian Diasporan Christian pastors eager to spread their message of faith to listeners back home. Ethnic Armenians and Assyrians have also begun sharing Christianity with their Muslim neighbours and friends. The proselytizing from Muslim-to-Christian converts in the Diaspora as well as Christian neighbours closer to home has led to the religion taking hold throughout Iran in numbers previously unseen. The underground nature of the Christian conversion movement has made numbers impossible to determine accurately. Estimates range from 300,000 to 500,000 by various sources. Though these statistics cannot be independently verified, converts and pastors both in and out of Iran say the movement is strong and widely spread. Some converts have also been reported to travel to neighbouring Armenia to become baptized.’<sup>14</sup>

5.1.7 The ICHRI reported that: ‘The Protestant community in Iran faces far more aggressive government restrictions and human rights abuses than ethnic Christian groups. This stems largely from their use of the Persian language in church services and literature and their commitment to proselytizing (all of which facilitate conversion, which is anathema to the regime), as well as the

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<sup>12</sup> Immigration and Refugee board of Canada, Iran: Teachings, Interpretations and Knowledge of Christianity among Non-Ethnic Christians, 18 March 2014 <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=country&docid=533925814&skip=0&coi=IRN&querysi=ethnic%20christian&searchin=title&sort=date> [accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>13</sup> Minorities at risk, Assessment for Christians in Iran, undated, <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/assessment.asp?groupid=63010> [date accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>14</sup> The Guardian, ‘Our second mother’: Iran's converted Christians find sanctuary in Germany, 12 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/may/12/iran-converted-christians-sanctuary-germany-muslim> [date accessed 16 November 2015]

affiliations some Protestant churches have to denominations and church networks abroad.’<sup>15</sup>

5.1.8 The Iran Primer noted that: ‘Christians not associated with an ethnic group, such as Protestants, are not represented in parliament.’<sup>16</sup>

5.1.9 According to the UN Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran:

‘Christian religious practice, in general, is monitored and heavily regulated. For example, Muslim converts to Christianity cannot enter Armenian or Assyrian Churches, as all churchgoers must register with the government and authorities often place cameras in churches.’

‘The Christians most commonly prosecuted appear to be converts from Muslim backgrounds or those that proselytize or minister to Iranian Muslims. Iranian authorities at the highest levels have designated house churches and evangelical Christians as threats to national security.[...] Christians, many of whom are converts from Muslim backgrounds, have faced a similar pattern of persecution.’<sup>17</sup>

5.1.10 The March 2015 Christians in Parliament report on the persecution of Christians in Iran noted that:

‘Since the 1979 Revolution, the government has not granted a licence for the establishment of a new church organisation or allowed the construction of any church building, Orthodox, Protestant, or other. It has required recognised churches to limit attendance to those who are not from a Muslim background, and to conduct services only in the minority languages of Assyrian or Armenian. Churches have also been closed down, and had leaders arrested, if they refused to comply with these restrictions.’

‘There continues to be a limit to how high religious minorities can ascend in their careers. The ‘gozinesh criterion’, a selection procedure requiring prospective state officials and employees to demonstrate allegiance to the Islamic Republic of Iran and the state religion, puts a glass ceiling onto the career prospects of religious minorities.’<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, The Cost of Faith – Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran – 2013, [http://www.iranhumanrights.org/mwg-internal/de5fs23hu73ds/progress?id=SigJF6Q1\\_hgbFLOHGLAkjgp7TY0EQWyGrY4PkQBV4kY,&dl](http://www.iranhumanrights.org/mwg-internal/de5fs23hu73ds/progress?id=SigJF6Q1_hgbFLOHGLAkjgp7TY0EQWyGrY4PkQBV4kY,&dl) [date accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>16</sup> The Iran Primer, Rivals on Women & Minorities: ISIS v Iran, 12 February 2015, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2015/feb/12/rivals-women-minorities-isis-v-iran> [date accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>17</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 18 March 2014, A/HRC/25/61, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/534e4d0d4.html> [accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>18</sup> Christians in Parliament, The persecution of Christians in Iran, March 2015 <http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>, [date accessed 17 November 2015]

## 5.2 Evangelicals and House Churches

5.2.1 The BBC reports that evangelical Christians are not recognised and face heavy discrimination.<sup>19</sup>

5.2.2 The US Department of State stated in its annual report covering 2014 that:  
'Christians, particularly evangelicals, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and high levels of harassment and surveillance. The status of many of these cases was not known at year's end. Authorities released some Christians almost immediately upon detention, but held others in secret locations without access to attorneys. The United Nations Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran reported in October that authorities held at least 49 Protestant Christians in custody, many for involvement in informal house churches.'

5.2.3 The report also noted that:

'The government enforced the prohibition on proselytizing by closely monitoring the activities of evangelical Christians, barring all non-members from entering church premises, closing churches, and arresting Christian converts. Authorities pressed evangelical church leaders to sign pledges that they would not evangelize Muslims or allow Muslims to attend church services. Meetings for evangelical services remained restricted to Sundays. Christian advocacy groups confirmed that through church closures and other pressure, the government had eliminated in recent years all but a handful of Persian-language church services, restricting them to the Armenian and Assyrian languages. Pastors of forcibly closed Persian-language churches reported pressure from the government to leave the country, and the government prevented ordination of new ministers. Members of evangelical congregations were required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which had to be provided to the authorities. Security officials posted outside congregation centers subjected worshippers to identity checks. Christians of all denominations reported the presence of security cameras outside their churches to confirm that no non-Christians participated in services.'<sup>20</sup>

5.2.4 In August 2014, Human Rights Watch reported that 'Iranian security and intelligence forces consider proselytizing by Christians a security threat and has systematically targeted those involved—especially those not affiliated with Iran's indigenous Christian communities, such as Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> BBC News, Guide: Christians in the Middle East, 11 October 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15239529> [date accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>20</sup> US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, 14 October 2015, Section II Government Practises <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238454> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>21</sup> Human Rights Watch, Locked up in Karaj: Spotlight on Political Prisoners in One Iranian City, 18 August 2014, Religious Minority Activists and Community Leaders,

5.2.5 The Danish Immigration Service noted in its June 2014 report of their fact-finding mission that:

‘it is mainly the Evangelical churches that are seen as a threat to the regime and consequently are of interest to the authorities. Some of these churches are based on U.S funding and the authorities therefore make a link between activities of Evangelical churches and relations to foreign bodies and thus to espionage and undermining of Islam in a political sense. Although it is hard for the authorities to pin such accusations on individuals, there is a threat of such a charge, and there is a public consensus, including the judiciary and law enforcement authorities, that conversion to Christianity and evangelical networks are politically motivated and linked to Iran’s relations with the West.’<sup>22</sup>

5.2.6 According to The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran report from 2013 titled ‘The Cost of Faith – Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran’:

‘Church groups are routinely subjected to state monitoring and harassment in Iran. This monitoring takes both open and covert forms. The Ministry of Intelligence, Police or Revolutionary Courts would summon church leaders for questioning and try to coerce them into providing information about church activities, services, education programs and the names and backgrounds of church members. Christians also reported to the ICHRI that intelligence officers told them they were following them and tapping their phones. The information gathered by the Ministry of Intelligence then becomes the basis for arrests, prosecutions and the closure of churches.’

‘Over the last few years, state officials and clerics who influence state policy have increasingly spoken out against the growth of evangelicalism and house churches, articulating a rationale for state repression. Since Iran’s constitution recognizes Christians as a religious minority with certain rights, and Christians are afforded certain protections under traditional Islamic jurisprudence as a “people of the book,” Iranian officials and clerics try to differentiate evangelicals and house churches from Christianity. They claim that evangelicals and house churches are a deviant form of Christianity, different from state-recognized Christianity.’<sup>23</sup>

5.2.7 Christian Solidarity worldwide noted that:

‘Since 2010 house churches have been targeted in a campaign of raids and arrests. Pastors and members of several church networks in cities across

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<https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/18/locked-karaj/spotlight-political-prisoners-one-iranian-city> [date accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>22</sup> Danish Immigration Service – Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran – June 2014, 1.2.1 Charges used against Christian converts over time, <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/78D46647-A0AD-4B36-BE0A-C32FEC4947EF/0/RapportIranFFM10062014II.pdf> [date accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>23</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, The Cost of Faith – Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran – 2013, [http://www.iranhumanrights.org/mwg-internal/de5fs23hu73ds/progress?id=SigJF6Q1\\_hgbFLOHGLAkjgp7TY0EQWyGrY4PkQBV4kY,&dl](http://www.iranhumanrights.org/mwg-internal/de5fs23hu73ds/progress?id=SigJF6Q1_hgbFLOHGLAkjgp7TY0EQWyGrY4PkQBV4kY,&dl) [date accessed 16 November 2015]

the nation have been interrogated, imprisoned and their belongings confiscated. Converts from Islam have been particularly targeted, as they are seen as undermining Shia Islam through abandoning their former religion. Some of those arrested are released after paying exorbitant bail demands.<sup>24</sup>

5.2.8 The US International Religious Freedom report for 2014 noted that:

‘Official reports and the media characterized Christian house churches as “illegal networks” and “Zionist propaganda institutions.” Arrested members of house churches were often accused of being supported by enemy countries. On October 19 [2014], courts sentenced house church leader Behnam Irani and fellow Church of Iran leaders Abdolreza Ali-Haghnejad and Reza Rabbani to six years in prison on charges of “action against national security” and “creating a network to overthrow the system,” according to Middle East Concern and other human rights groups.’<sup>25</sup>

5.2.9 UN General Assembly, ‘Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran : note by the Secretary-General’ published on 6 October 2015 noted that:

‘Christians reportedly continue to be prosecuted for their involvement in informal house churches. On 1 March 2015, Pastor Victor Ben -Tamarz, the former head of the Shahrara Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Tehran who was arrested in December 2014 while performing a Christmas service at his house, was released on bail until his trial. On 15 April 2015, the Shahr Shahr Revolutionary Court upheld the one-year prison sentence and two - year travel ban of 13 Christian converts who were arrested on 2 February 2013 at a house church and were charged with “propaganda against the State”, “advocating for Evangelical Christianity” and “establishing house churches”. In its comments on the present report, the Government maintained that “there is no need to establish new churches” because the current ones meet the religious needs of religious minorities”, and noted that the activities of “house churches are considered illegal”.<sup>26</sup>

5.2.10 In August 2015 Christian post reported that:

‘A group of at least eight Christian converts were beaten and arrested by Iranian authorities while they were gathered for worship inside a house church in the city of Karaj, an Iranian resistance group has reported. According to the National Council of Resistance of Iran, plainclothes officers raided the church earlier this month as part of a wide crackdown on house churches. After raiding the house, the officers beat up the congregants and

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<sup>24</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Iran profile, undated, [http://www.csw.org.uk/our\\_work\\_profile\\_iran.htm](http://www.csw.org.uk/our_work_profile_iran.htm) [date accessed 10 November 2015]

<sup>25</sup> US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, 14 October 2015, Section II Government Practises <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dlid=238454> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>26</sup> UN General Assembly, Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran : note by the Secretary-General, 6 October 2015, A/70/411, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5631da2c4.html> [accessed 16 November 2015]



then confiscated their Bibles, other Christian literature and satellite dishes located on the premises. Eyewitnesses said the worshipers were arrested and put into a van to be taken to an undisclosed prison for detention.<sup>27</sup>

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### 5.3 Treatment of Christians

5.3.1 The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, stated in a report published on 12 March 2015 that:

‘As of 1 January 2015, at least 92 Christians remain in detention in the country allegedly due to their Christian faith and activities. In 2014 alone, 69 Christian converts were reportedly arrested and detained for at least 24 hours across Iran. Authorities reportedly continued to target the leaders of house churches, generally from Muslim backgrounds. Christian converts also allegedly continue to face restrictions in observing their religious holidays. On 25 December, Iranian authorities reportedly raided a house church in the town of Rudehen and arrested nine individuals who had gathered to celebrate Christmas. Authorities also arrested Pastor Victor Beth Tamarz, the former head of the Shahrara Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Tehran, along with two other Christian converts on 26 December while the Pastor was performing a Christmas service. Pastor Victor Beth Tamarz has reportedly been under pressure for performing Persian-language services since 2009. On 19 October 2014, the Revolutionary Court of Alborz Province sentenced Pastors Behnam Irani, Reza Rabbani and Abdolreza (Mathias) Haghnejad to six years in prison on charges of “acting against national security” and “forming groups to overthrow the government.” Pastor Irani is currently serving a six year sentence in prison for “acting against national security” and “establishing illegal groups with the intention to overthrow the government.” The Government clarified that the Alborz Province’s Court of Appeal acquitted Mr. Haghnejad.<sup>28</sup>

5.3.2 The US Commission on International Religious Freedom noted in its annual report that: ‘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.’<sup>29</sup>

5.3.3 The March 2015 Christians in Parliament report on the persecution of Christians in Iran noted that: ‘During Rouhani’s presidency, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) has not diminished its efforts to crush the

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<sup>27</sup> Christian post, Iranian Police Beat and Arrest Christian Converts During Raid on House Church, 18 August 2015

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/iranian-police-beat-and-arrest-christian-converts-during-raid-on-house-church-143107/#X8LfsuMvX7Y8CZ8.99> [date accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>28</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 12 March 2015, A/HRC/28/70, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/550ff19c4.html> [accessed 10 November 2015]

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2015: Iran, 1 May 2015 <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Iran%202015.pdf> [accessed 10 November 2015]

growth of the church through the arrest and detention of Christian leaders and those seen to be involved in Christian ministry.’

5.3.4 The report went on to note that:

‘Witnesses testified that raids on private homes of Christians, and subsequent arrests and detentions, are widespread in Iran. These raids are most often reported to have been orchestrated by agents of MOIS, and can sometimes involve violence. In one house raid of July 2014, a 12 year old boy endured physical abuse.’

‘It is not only the house church Christians that face monitoring, but also religious institutions. Most of the remaining registered churches have government security cameras installed outside of them. Although these institutions are registered and recognised by the government, religious minorities continue to be viewed with suspicion.’<sup>30</sup>

5.3.5 The US Commission on International Religious Freedom noted in its annual report that:

‘Since 2010, authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained more than 500 Christians throughout the country. As of February 2015, approximately 90 Christians were either in prison, detained, or awaiting trial because of their religious beliefs and activities. 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 2014, authorities raided a number of private Christmas services and arrested more than a dozen church members in Tehran.’

‘Iranian-born American pastor Saeed Abedini continues to serve an eight-year prison term after being convicted in 2013 for “threatening the national security of Iran” for his activity in the Christian house church movement. While in Evin Prison since September 2012, Pastor Abedini spent several weeks in solitary confinement and was physically and psychologically abused. In November 2013, he was transferred to the Rajai Shahr Prison, which is known for its harsh and unsanitary conditions. In March 2014, prison authorities beat Pastor Abedini after which he was hospitalized for nearly two months to receive treatment for the injuries sustained from the beatings. In May 2014, Pastor Abedini was beaten a second time when he was released from the hospital and returned to prison.’<sup>31</sup>

5.3.6 The US Department of State 2014 International Religious Freedom Report noted that:

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<sup>30</sup> Christians in Parliament, The persecution of Christians in Iran, March 2015 <http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>, [date accessed 17 November 2015]

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2015: Iran, 1 May 2015 <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Iran%202015.pdf> [accessed 10 November 2015]

'Police targeted Christians with home raids, sometimes confiscating personal property in such raids, including religious materials. On September 27 2014, plain clothes agents raided Christian actor Shahram Ghaedi's home, according to Iranian Christian news agency Mohabat News. The agents arrested Ghaedi and two other Christian converts, Heshmat Shafiei and Emad Haghi, and transferred them to the security ward of Dastgerd Prison in Isfahan. The agents reportedly searched Ghaedi's house and confiscated some of his belongings, including books and a computer.'<sup>32</sup>

5.3.7 According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW):

'Christians are routinely charged with political crimes in an attempt justify their sentences, although this is simply a ruse for imprisoning them on account of their faith. Recent arrests have targeted members of the Assemblies of God (AoG) movement, which had previously enjoyed government sanction. Several AoG pastors and church members have been imprisoned, including Farshid Fathi and Saeed Abedini. The latter was sentenced to eight years in prison earlier in 2013.'

5.3.8 CSW also noted that:

'Government-sanctioned churches are watched closely by intelligence forces with pastors asked to hand over details of their members. Churches have also been asked to end their Friday Farsi-speaking services in a clear attempt to reduce attendance, since Friday is a weekend day and Sunday is a working day. The last Farsi-speaking church in Tehran was ordered to cease its Sunday services in Farsi earlier in 2013. Following pressure from the authorities, the church's leaders decided to close the church.'<sup>33</sup>

5.3.9 The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran report 'The Cost of Faith – Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran' published 16 January 2013 noted that:

'Although the Iranian constitution provides for free expression, in practice the Iranian government violates this right. Christians are arrested, detained and prosecuted for evangelism and for distributing Christian literature. Persian-language Christian websites are blocked and the four Persian language Christian satellite stations are intermittently jammed. Access to the Bible is significantly curtailed and the publication and import of the Bible has been largely prohibited. There have been instances of security officials confiscating Bibles, and, in some cases, burning Bibles and arresting Christians for distributing Bibles. The government also severely restricts the use of Persian in churches, diminishing the accessibility of sermons to the largely Farsi-speaking population.'<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, 14 October 2015, Section II Government Practises <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dlid=238454> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>33</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Iran profile, undated, [http://www.csw.org.uk/our\\_work\\_profile\\_iran.htm](http://www.csw.org.uk/our_work_profile_iran.htm) [date accessed 10 November 2015]

<sup>34</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, The Cost of Faith – Persecution of Christian

5.3.10 The US Department of State 2014 International Religious Freedom Report noted:

‘The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) closely monitor religious activity, while churches fall under the oversight of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The government closely monitors and regulates Christian religious practice. All churchgoers must register with the authorities, who prevent Muslim converts to Christianity from entering Armenian or Assyrian churches, according to UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran Ahmed Shaheed.’

‘Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year’s end. Prison authorities reportedly withheld proper medical care from many prisoners, including some Christians, according to human rights groups. On April 17, a prison guard reportedly broke Christian convert Farshid Fathi’s foot by stomping on it during a cell inspection in Evin Prison. Authorities reportedly then prevented Fathi from visiting a hospital for three days.’<sup>35</sup>

5.3.11 The UN Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran reported in March 2014 under the heading ‘Religious minorities’ that:

‘former detainees report being subjected to torture or cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment and prolonged solitary confinement to coerce confessions to accusations or admissions about other people. Many detainees also reported being held largely incommunicado, without access to a lawyer. Some prosecutions reportedly failed to meet international standards, marked by limited access to case files and the right to present a defence. Under the law, religious minorities, including recognized Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians, also face discrimination in the judicial system, such as harsher punishments than Muslims for certain crimes, and are barred from serving as judges.’<sup>36</sup>

5.3.12 The Danish Immigration Service report published in June 2014 following their fact-finding mission interviewed an international organisation in Turkey that observed that ‘there have been reports of torturing of converts while in detention and it is considered that the authorities want to intimidate those detained, either to stop their activities or to coerce them to co-operate.’<sup>37</sup>

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Protestants and Converts in Iran – 16 January 2013, Executive Summary

[http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/01/cost\\_of\\_faith/](http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/01/cost_of_faith/) [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>35</sup> US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, 14 October 2015, Section II Government Practises

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238454> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>36</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 18 March 2014, A/HRC/25/61, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/534e4d0d4.html> [accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>37</sup> Danish Immigration Service – Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran – June 2014, 1.2.2 Iranian legislation and cases against converts,

[http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/78D46647-A0AD-4B36-BE0A-](http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/78D46647-A0AD-4B36-BE0A-C32FEC4947EF/0/RapportIranFFM10062014II.pdf)

[C32FEC4947EF/0/RapportIranFFM10062014II.pdf](http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/78D46647-A0AD-4B36-BE0A-C32FEC4947EF/0/RapportIranFFM10062014II.pdf) [date accessed 16 November 2015]

- 5.3.13 The US Department of State stated in its annual report covering 2014 that: 'Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year's end. Prison authorities reportedly withheld proper medical care from many prisoners, including some Christians, according to human rights groups.'<sup>38</sup>
- 5.3.14 The Christians in Parliament report noted that: 'Interrogations of Christian detainees or prisoners are most often perpetrated by agents of the MOIS. Detainees often endure sessions of interrogation that last many hours, and face regular sessions across many days or weeks, in between which they are generally held in solitary confinement.'
- 5.3.15 The report also noted that;  
'The methods of interrogations in jail have become harsher. In several cases, Christians were seriously physically and mentally abused, including threats of execution.'<sup>39</sup>

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## 6. Muslim Converts to Christianity

- 6.1.1 The March 2015 Christians in Parliament report on the persecution of Christians in Iran noted that:  
'Iran's non-tolerance of conversion from Islam (apostasy) was articulated publicly in October 2014 by Ali Younesi, Rouhani's senior advisor on Ethnic and Religious Minority Affairs. During an interview with the conservative news agency, Fars, Younesi declared that "Converting to different sects is illegal in our country" and also that evangelism is illegal for minority faith groups. It has long been known that Iran does not tolerate conversion to minority faiths, nor evangelism, but this interview is the most recent, direct and public affirmation of these policies from a senior figure.'<sup>40</sup>
- 6.1.2 The US Department of State reported in its annual report covering 2014 that: 'Muslim converts to Christianity faced harassment, arrest, and jailing. Many arrests took place during police raids on religious gatherings, during which the government confiscated religious property. Iranian officials reportedly raided a house church in Tehran August 12 and arrested Christian converts Mehdi Vaziri and Amir Kian. Both were believed to be held at the Ghezel-Hesar Prison at year's end.'<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, 14 October 2015, Section II Government Practises  
<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238454> [date accessed 16 November 2015]

<sup>39</sup> Christians in Parliament, The persecution of Christians in Iran, March 2015  
<http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>, [date accessed 17 November 2015]

<sup>40</sup> Christians in Parliament, The persecution of Christians in Iran, March 2015  
<http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>, [date accessed 17 November 2015]

<sup>41</sup> US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014, 14 October 2015,

- 6.1.3 The Danish Immigration Service report published in June 2014 reported on the obstacles Iranian converts face in Iran because of their conversion to Christianity, stating:

‘an international organisation in Turkey did not consider that there would be any issues if this is not made known. However, if a convert is active in informal church activities or proselytizing, problems may arise with the authorities. Additionally, if conversion comes to the knowledge of the authorities, an individual might lose his or her job. The source explained that at workplaces in Iran, there are offices of Herasat (representatives of the Ministry of Intelligence and State Security) that monitor the employees. They are also at universities, state organisations and schools. Private companies of a certain size will also have a Herasat office. If Herasat gets news of a person’s conversion, he or she could risk being dismissed from his or her job. Additionally, family members could also risk losing their jobs or be denied access to higher learning.’<sup>42</sup> The same source noted that ‘in neighbourhoods of towns and cities, there are Basij connected to the local mosques and a person may be asked to attend mosque and this could especially be expected of men of a certain age. It was added that according to the Islamic rules, the religious obligations for girls and boys to start praying begin at the ages of nine and fifteen respectively, where congregational prayers in mosques are encouraged as part of communal activities. The expectation to attend mosques in neighbourhoods can be viewed as part of societal norms and may depend for instance on the mosque or Friday imam’s attitude and sensitivities.’<sup>43</sup>

- 6.1.4 Amnesty International’s International Secretariat told the fact-finding mission that:

‘Converts would have to hide their faith in order to be employed in certain jobs. For many jobs it is necessary to fill out a form in which one’s religion is indicated. Overall, there is widespread discrimination against minorities with regard to access to education and employment. The impact of discrimination may vary depending on whether an individual is employed in a private company or a government position. However, even in privately owned companies, employers may be forced by the authorities to dismiss employees on the grounds of their religious faith.’ The same source further noted what may happen if a person is arrested on suspicion of being a convert: ‘By the time the case goes to court, or the accused may be released without charges, there will have been a substantial risk of ill-treatment or

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Section II Government Practises

<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dliid=238454> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>42</sup> Danish Immigration Service – Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran – June 2014, 1.1 Consequences of conversion, including obstacles with regard to education, employment and dealings with the authorities, <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/78D46647-A0AD-4B36-BE0A-C32FEC4947EF/0/RapportIranFFM10062014II.pdf> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>43</sup> Danish Immigration Service – Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran – June 2014, 1.1 Consequences of conversion, including obstacles with regard to education, employment and dealings with the authorities, <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/78D46647-A0AD-4B36-BE0A-C32FEC4947EF/0/RapportIranFFM10062014II.pdf> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

torture while in incarceration. It should not be underestimated what can happen from the time of arrest up until a court hearing. It was further explained that those who are arrested may be kept in secret detention centres which fall outside of the courts system. Both individuals detained in prison and secret detention centres frequently are denied access to counsel.<sup>44</sup>

6.1.5 According to Mansour Borji, Advocacy Officer at Article 18, and interviewed for the Danish Immigration Service fact-finding mission:

‘If you are born Muslim and convert to Christianity, you are considered an apostate. However, there are no recent cases in court where an individual has been charged with apostasy. Mansour Borji referred to a recent case of a female Christian convert who has been imprisoned for a long time. According to the source, based on some religious ruling by Shiia clergy, this woman could have only two options: she could either recant her faith or she would die in prison [...] Some Christian converts may risk maltreatment from their own family members and relatives but mostly, Christian converts are facing persecution at the hands of the state. The source found that family members would report on their own family if somebody has converted to Christianity, often with good intentions hoping that an encounter with the authorities will have a ‘deterrent’ effect on them and make them forget about conversion. It could also happen that neighbours report on a convert, however, the source considered that the threat of persecution came mainly from the authorities.’<sup>45</sup>

6.1.6 Mansour Borji, Advocacy Officer at Article 18, further explained that:

‘Christian converts are considered second class citizens who have no right to live a Christian life and who have to keep their religious conviction a secret. Converts have to balance between their belief to share their Christianity with others and the daily risk they may face if their faith is exposed to the authorities. Mansour Borji added that the question of the upbringing of children is also a concern for convert families in Iran. In school, children have to participate in religious education and learn about Islamic principles. In such situations the child of a Christian convert may not realize the security issues if he or she speaks about their situation at home where the family practices a Christian life. The source further referred to the fact that a Christian wedding between converts is not recognized by the Iranian authorities. The only way for converts to Christianity to marry legally in Iran is according to Islamic law.’<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Danish Immigration Service – Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran – June 2014, 1.1 Consequences of conversion, including obstacles with regard to education, employment and dealings with the authorities, <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/78D46647-A0AD-4B36-BE0A-C32FEC4947EF/0/RapportIranFFM10062014II.pdf> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>45</sup> Danish Immigration Service – Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran – June 2014, 1.3 Consequences of conversion with regard to a convert’s relation to family and social network,, <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/78D46647-A0AD-4B36-BE0A-C32FEC4947EF/0/RapportIranFFM10062014II.pdf> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>46</sup> Danish Immigration Service – Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran – June 2014,

- 6.1.7 The Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre stated in its July 2014 report, focusing on apostasy in Iran, that:

‘Under Iranian law, a Muslim who leaves his or her faith or converts to another religion can be charged with apostasy. In addition, any person, Muslim or non-Muslim, may be charged with the crime of “swearing at the Prophet” if he or she makes utterances that are deemed derogatory towards the Prophet Mohammad, other Shi’a holy figures, or other divine prophets. Both apostasy and swearing at the Prophet are capital offences. While the latter has been specifically criminalized in the Islamic Penal Code, the former has not been explicitly mentioned as a crime. Nevertheless, provisions in the Islamic Penal Code and the Iranian Constitution state that Shari’a, or Islamic religious law, applies to situations in which the law is silent. As a result, the Iranian judiciary is empowered to bring apostasy charges based on its interpretation of Shari’a law [...] Cases of apostasy and swearing at the Prophet are rare occurrences in Iran. Nevertheless, a diverse group of individuals has been charged with these religious crimes. Muslim-born converts to Christianity, Bahá’ís Muslims who challenge the prevailing interpretation of Islam, and others who espouse unconventional religious beliefs have been targeted and prosecuted by the Iranian state. In some instances, apostasy cases have clear political overtones, while others seem to be primarily of a religious nature.’<sup>47</sup>

- 6.1.8 The US Commission on International Religious Freedom noted in its annual report that:

‘In October 2014, three Christian converts – Silas Rabbani, Abdolreza Haghnejad, and Behnam Irani – were sentenced to six years in prison in remote parts of the country for bogus charges of “action against national security” and “creating a network to overthrow the system.” In December, the sentences were dropped against the three and Rabbani and Haghnejad were released. Irani continues to serve a separate six year sentence. Christian convert Farshid Fathi, who was arrested in 2010 and sentenced in 2012 to six years in prison for his religious activities, was beaten by security officials and injured during a April 2014 raid at Evin Prison. In August, he was transferred to Rajai Shahr Prison outside Tehran and in December he was given an additional one-year prison sentence in connection with the April prison raid.’<sup>48</sup>

- 6.1.9 Christians in Parliament noted that:

‘Most Christians who have been detained report that they were threatened with the death penalty many times by interrogators and guards. The

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1.4 Practicing a Christian Life as Converts in Iran and possible restrictions, <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/78D46647-A0AD-4B36-BE0A-C32FEC4947EF/0/RapportIranFFM10062014II.pdf> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>47</sup> Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, Apostasy in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 30 July 2014, Executive Summary, <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/reports/1000000512-apostasy-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran.html> [date accessed 11 November 2015]

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report 2015: Iran, 1 May 2015 <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Iran%202015.pdf> [accessed 10 November 2015]



possibility remains that male Christians could be sentenced to death for apostasy: although apostasy is not encoded in Iran's laws, judges can invoke Article 167 of Iran's Constitution, which allows them to refer to 'authentic Islamic sources or authoritative Fatwas' when making their judgements. Under Sharia law, apostasy is punishable by death for men and life imprisonment for women. Christians could also potentially face death sentences for the aforementioned crimes of Moharebeh or Mofsed-e-filarz.'

'Whenever any convert to Christianity is arrested, pressure is put on them to persuade them to return to Islam during interrogation and throughout their time in detention.'

6.1.10 The report also noted that:

'conversion away from Islam can lead to the loss of a job in state institutions, or in cases where the employer does not tolerate conversion.'

'Converts to Christianity have additional battles to face in daily life. Most converts still have names that identify them as having a Muslim heritage. Given that conversion is not tolerated, these individuals are still viewed and treated as Muslim in Iranian law and bureaucracy.'<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Christians in Parliament, The persecution of Christians in Iran, March 2015  
<http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>, [date accessed 17 November 2015]

# Annex A: Caselaw

**SZ and JM (Christians – FS confirmed) Iran CG [2008] UKAIT 00082** (12 November 2008)

The then Asylum and Immigration Tribunal found that:

“Conditions for Christians in Iran have not deteriorated sufficiently to necessitate a change in the guidance in FS Iran CG [2004] UKIAT 00303 Iran. For some converts to sacrament-based churches the conditions may be such that they could not reasonably be expected to return and their cases must be considered on HJ (homosexuality: reasonably tolerating living discreetly) Iran [2008] UKAIT 00044 \* grounds.

It remains to be seen whether the proposed inclusion of apostasy in the amended criminal code will make a material difference. The amendments to the code are part of a wholesale change in the criminal law and not solely aimed at converts. The proposals are still before Parliament.

'Proselytising' and 'evangelising' are not terms of art and distinctions should not be drawn between them.”

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\* see subsequent Supreme Court Judgement in HJ

## **Supreme Court. HJ & HT v SSHD [2010] UKSC31 7 July 2010**

The Supreme Court hereby established the test which should be applied when assessing a claim based on fear of persecution because of an applicant's sexual orientation which is as follows:

- (i) Is the applicant gay or someone who would be treated as gay by potential persecutors in the country of origin?
- (ii) If yes, would gay people who live openly be liable to persecution in that country of origin?
- (iii) How would the applicant behave on return? If the applicant would live openly and be exposed to a real risk of persecution, he has a well-founded fear of persecution even if he could avoid the risk by living discreetly.
- (iv) If the applicant would live discreetly, why would he live discreetly? If the applicant would live discreetly because he wanted to do so, or because of social pressures (e.g. not wanting to distress his parents or embarrass his friends) then he is not a

refugee. But if a material reason for living discreetly would be the fear of persecution that would follow if he lived openly, then he is a refugee.

**FS and others (Iran, Christian Converts) Iran CG [2004] UKIAT 00303 (17 November 2004)**

The then Immigration Appeal Tribunal found that:

“Conclusions [...] 153. The evidence shows that those Christians who are not converts from Islam and who are members of ethnic minority Churches are not persecuted, at least as a general rule. They are accepted but nonetheless suffer from societal discrimination and a second class status in the eyes of the state and its institutions, such as the substantive laws and the administration of justice, the Majlis, public sector employment and university entrance. The attitude towards them of the state in its various manifestations may vary over time, as may the attitude of Muslims where they live, but at present those Christians do not face a real risk of persecution even though they face real discrimination. Persecution after the Revolution had given way to discrimination. [...]”

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# Version Control and Contacts

## Contacts

If you have any questions about the guidance and your line manager or senior caseworker cannot help you or you think that the guidance has factual errors then email [the Country Policy and Information Team](#).

If you notice any formatting errors in this guidance (broken links, spelling mistakes and so on) or have any comments about the layout or navigability of the guidance then you can email [the Guidance, Rules and Forms Team](#).

## Clearance

Below is information on when this version of the guidance was cleared:

- version **2.0**
- valid from **2 December 2015**
- this version approved by **Sally Weston, Deputy Director, Legal Strategy Team**
- approved on: **25 November 2015**

## Changes from last version of this guidance

Updated Country Information

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