

CORI

Country of origin research and information

CORI Research Analysis

Date: 6 November 2014

Country: Iran

Ref: Iran1114

Issues: Information on situation of persons who convert from Shia to Sunni Islam; how are they treated by the State and its organs

CORI research analyses are prepared on the basis of publicly available information studies and commentaries and produced within a specified time frame. All sources are cited and fully referenced. Every effort has been taken to ensure accuracy and comprehensive coverage of the research issue however as Country of Origin Information (COI) is reliant on publicly available documentation there may be instances where the required information is not available. The analyses are not and do not purport to be either exhaustive with regard to conditions in the country surveyed or conclusive as to the merits of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read the full text of each document referred to using the URL provided in the footnote.

1) Iran: information on situation of persons who convert from Shia to Sunni Islam; how are they treated by the State and its organs

The U.S. Department of State (USDOS) estimates Muslims constitute 99 percent of the population of Iran; 90 percent are Shia and 9 percent Sunni (mostly Turkmen, Arabs, Baluchis, and Kurds living in the northeast, southwest, southeast, and northwest, respectively).¹

In July 2014 USDOS reported that the Iranian constitution and other laws and policies severely restrict freedom of religion. Ja'afari Shiism Islam is the official religion. Religious minorities including Sunnis are eligible to vote, but are ineligible to be president,

¹ United States Department of State (USDOS) 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iran, 28 July 2014, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53d9076514.html>, accessed 25 October 2014

“The constitution and other laws and policies severely restrict freedom of religion. The constitution declares the "official religion is Islam and the doctrine followed is that of Ja'afari Shiism." The constitution states all laws and regulations must be based on undefined "Islamic criteria" and official interpretation of sharia (Islamic law).”²

The government allows religious minorities to vote; however, religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims, are ineligible to be president.

Members of religious minority groups, except Sunni Muslims, may not serve in the judiciary, security services, or as public school principals.”³

In July 2014 *USDOS* reported that non-Shia religious leaders report bans on Sunni religious literature and on Sunni teachings in public schools. *USDOS* reported that Sunnis may not build new schools or mosques.⁴

In July 2014 *USDOS* reported that the Iranian government created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, including Sunni Muslims,

“The government severely restricted religious freedom. Government rhetoric and actions continued to create a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-Shia religious groups, most notably for Bahais, as well as for Sunni Muslims, including Sufis; Christians, especially evangelicals; Jews; and Shia groups that did not share the government's religious views. Government-controlled broadcast and print media continued negative campaigns against religious minorities, particularly Bahais. All non-Shia religious minorities suffered varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, especially in employment, education, and housing.”⁵

In July 2014 *USDOS* reported that there were reports of arrests and harassment of Sunnis,

“There were reports of arrests and harassment of Sunnis. Intelligence officials re-arrested Sunni activist Hossein Javadi on the charge of acting against national security after the Supreme Court had exonerated him from this charge and released him after three years imprisonment in Rajai Shahr Prison, according to human rights activists. At year's end, Javadi was reportedly back in Rajai Shahr Prison serving the remainder of his original five-year sentence.”⁶

In March 2014 the *International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran* reported that 20 Arab Iranians were arrested for converting from Shia Islam to Sunni. It was reported that security forces have been cracking down on converts in the region,

² United States Department of State (USDOS) 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iran, 28 July 2014, : <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53d9076514.html>, accessed 25 October 2014

³ United States Department of State (USDOS) 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iran, 28 July 2014, : <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53d9076514.html>, accessed 25 October 2014

⁴ United States Department of State (USDOS) 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iran, 28 July 2014, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53d9076514.html>, accessed 25 October 2014

⁵ United States Department of State (USDOS) 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iran, 28 July 2014, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53d9076514.html>, accessed 25 October 2014

⁶ United States Department of State (USDOS) 2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iran, 28 July 2014, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53d9076514.html>, accessed 25 October 2014

“Security agents arrested 20 Arab-Iranians on February 26 in Ahvaz, Khuzestan Province, for converting from Shia’ Islam to Sunni, human rights activist Karim Dahimi told the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

“I have spoken to some of their families. They are all residents of Khashayar and Alavi neighborhoods of Ahvaz,” said Dahimi, who is based outside Iran.

“They had gathered in the home of one of the Arabs in the Alavi neighborhood to read the Quran and study Arabic. Security agents entered the house by force at 9 o’clock without a warrant, arrested everyone and took them to the Ahvaz detention center. The owner of the house was the only one who was not arrested. He had gone out to buy dinner and when he saw the police cars he ran away.”

The human rights activist pointed out that none of those arrested were involved in political activities but the security forces have been cracking down on converts in the region.

“In recent years many people in the south, especially in Shoush, Abadan, Shadegan, and Khorramshahr, have converted from the Shia’ faith to Sunni [Islam]. The Iranian government is worried about the growth of the Sunni population in the region and therefore it is being strict towards converts.”⁷

In July 2014 *Sunni Prisoners Iran, International Campaign for Sunni Prisoners in Iran*, a local Iranian NGO, reported the arrest of a Sunni convert as part of a crackdown on Sunnis,

“The Iranian security forces arrested yet another Ahwazi Sunni convert in the Khuzestan province on Thursday, with at least ten other Sunni converts arrested in the area within the last fortnight.

35-year old Saeed Haydari, who recently converted from Shi’ism to Sunni Islam, was arrested on 24 July 2014 at his home in the town of Taleghani (Al-Kora) in Mahshahr city, Khuzestan. His arrest is believed to be directly related to his religious activities and his conversion to Sunni Islam.

The Shia Iranian government has been alarmed by the rise of Sunni Islam among the Ahwazi Arabs in the traditionally Shia-majority Khuzestan province.

At least ten Sunni converts have been arrested in the last fortnight alone, with three arrested after openly preaching Sunni beliefs and a further seven arrested after holding congregational Sunni Taraweeh prayers.

More than 6000 books mocking Sunni beliefs were also distributed in Ahwaz on Monday, with information printed on the book indicating that they were published on the behalf of the Iranian government.”⁸

⁷ International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Arab-Iranian Sunni Converts Arrested, 07 March 2014, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2014/03/sunni-arab-converts/>, accessed 25 October 2014

⁸ Sunni Prisoners Iran: International Campaign for Sunni Prisoners in Iran, Iran arrests another Sunni convert in crackdown on the Sunnis of Ahwaz, 26 July 2014, <http://sunni-prisonersiran.com/another-ahwazi-sunni-convert-arrested-in-iran/>, accessed 25 October 2014

In February 2014 *Sunni Prisoners Iran, International Campaign for Sunni Prisoners in Iran* reported that nine Sunni men were arrested in Qal'eh Chan'an, Khuzestan province after converting to Sunni Islam,

“Nine men from Iran’s Ahwazi Arab minority were arrested in Qal’eh Chan’an, Khuzestan province of Iran, after they left their Shia beliefs and converted to Sunni Islam. The men, who had reportedly been arrested due to their ‘religious activism’, have been transferred to Karoun prison in Ahwaz.

26-year old Syed Amin, 26-year old Ali Hadi, 27-year old Hamid bin Hadi, 28-year old Jassem Mohammad Isa, 30-year old Jamal Khidr, 31-year old Abdullah Mohye Ahmad, 33-year old Syed Khalil, Foad Salamat and Abdol Rahim Salamat, were reportedly arrested in their houses in recent weeks by security forces.”⁹

In March 2014 the *Human Rights Activists News Agency* reported that a Sunni convert was arrested in Ahwaz, south-western Iran, as part of a series of arrests targeting converts to Sunni Islam,

“Iran’s crackdown of Sunni converts continues as security forces arrest another convert in southwestern Iran.

According to the report of Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), 35-year old Jafar Chaldawi, a Sunni convert from Iran’s Ahwazi Arab minority, was arrested on Monday by agents from the Ministry of Intelligence in the Hay al-Thawra district of Ahwaz, Khuzestan province. His arrest is the latest in a series of arrests targeting converts to Sunni Islam in the region.

Just days earlier, a 45-year old Sunni convert was arrested in Ahwaz on 6 March 2014. Iranian security forces also arrested more than 20 Sunni converts at a Qur’an and Arabic language study meeting in Ahwaz on 25 February 2014.

A further nine Ahwazi men were arrested earlier this year for ‘religious activism’ in Qal’eh Chan’an, Khuzestan province, after converting to Sunni Islam.”¹⁰

⁹ Sunni Prisoners Iran: International Campaign for Sunni Prisoners in Iran, Iran: Nine Ahwazi Arab men arrested after converting to Sunni Islam, 03 February 2014, <http://sunni-prisonersiran.com/iran-nine-ahwazi-arab-men-arrested-after-converting-to-sunni-islam/>, accessed 25 October 2014

¹⁰ Human Rights Activists News Agency, Another Sunni convert is arrested in Ahwaz, southwestern Iran 14 March 2014, <https://hra-news.org/en/another-sunni-convert-arrested-ahwaz-southwestern-iran>, accessed 25 October 2014