



Home Office

# Country Policy and Information Note

## Iran: Zoroastrians

Version 1.0

June 2017

# Preface

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and policy 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 policy guidance contained with this note; the available COI; any applicable caselaw; and the Home Office casework guidance in relation to relevant policies.

## Country information

COI in this note has been researched in accordance with principles set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#) and the [European Asylum Support Office’s research guidelines, Country of Origin Information report methodology](#), namely taking into account its relevance, reliability, accuracy, objectivity, currency, transparency and traceability.

All information is carefully selected from generally reliable, publicly accessible sources or is information that can be made publicly available. Full publication details of supporting documentation are provided in footnotes. Multiple sourcing is normally used to ensure that the information is accurate, balanced and corroborated, and that a comprehensive and up-to-date picture at the time of publication is provided. Information is compared and contrasted, whenever possible, to provide a range of views and opinions. The inclusion of a source is not an endorsement of it or any views expressed.

## Feedback

Our goal is to continuously improve our material. Therefore, if you would like to comment on this note, please email [the Country Policy and Information Team](#).

## 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. IAGCI may be contacted at:

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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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# Policy guidance

Updated: 1 May 2017

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Basis of claim

- 1.1.1 Fear of persecution or serious harm by the state or non state actors because the person is of Zoroastrian faith or has converted to Zoroastrianism from another religion (or no religion)

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## 2. Consideration of issues

### 2.1 Credibility

- 2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see 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 (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).
- 2.1.4 A person's claim to have converted to the Zoroastrian faith should be considered in light of the potential restrictions regarding the ability to convert and acceptance by the Zoroastrian faith (see section 2.2(b) below).

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### 2.2 Assessment of risk

#### a. Those born into the Zoroastrian religion

- 2.2.1 The Iranian Constitution recognises Zoroastrians as a protected religious minority. There have been reports of Zoroastrians facing discrimination in some cases and some constraints in practising their faith as all laws and regulations are based on unique Shi'a Islamic criteria. However, it is not prevalent throughout Iran (see [State treatment](#)).
- 2.2.2 The reported number of those who have experienced such treatment are low and in general the level of discrimination faced by Zoroastrians is not sufficiently serious by its nature and repetition as to amount to persecution or serious harm. The onus will be on the person to demonstrate otherwise.

#### b. Zoroastrian converts

- 2.2.3 Some traditional Zoroastrians – namely Parsis who are based in India – do not accept converts nor do they accept children born to parents who have married outside of the Zoroastrian faith. However other parts of the Zoroastrian faith, including those in Iran, do accept children born of a Zoroastrian mother and non-Zoroastrian father, as well as converts from other religions or beliefs. Zoroastrians do not however actively seek to

convert others to their faith; and some resist accepting converts for fear of being accused of proselytising (see [Conversion to the Zoroastrian faith](#)).

- 2.2.4 It is a criminal offence in Iran to convert from Islam to another religion, and it is not possible for a person to change their religious affiliation on personal documentation. There are reports of some converts from Islam (and sometimes their family members) facing physical attacks, harassment, threats, surveillance, arrest, detention, as well as torture and ill-treatment in detention (see the country policy and information note on [Iran: Christians and Christian converts](#)).
- 2.2.5 Decision makers must also take account of how the person has practised their religion whilst in the UK. If it is found that the person will in fact conceal his or her conversion to the Zoroastrian faith if returned to Iran, decision makers must consider why the person will do so. If this will simply be in response to social pressures or for cultural or religious reasons of their own choosing and not because of a fear of persecution, then they may not have a well-founded fear of persecution. But if a material reason why the person will live discreetly is that they genuinely fear that otherwise they will be persecuted, it will be necessary to consider whether that fear is well founded.
- 2.2.6 Where a person has genuinely converted from Islam to the Zoroastrian faith and whose conversion is likely to come to the attention of the authorities, the person will be at real risk of persecution on return to Iran.
- 2.2.7 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#). For guidance on the consequences of illegal departure from Iran, see the country policy and information note on [Iran: Illegal exit](#).

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## 2.3 Protection

- 2.3.1 As the person's fear is of persecution or serious at the hands of the state, they will not be able to avail themselves of the protection of the authorities.
- 2.3.2 For further guidance on assessing the availability of state protection, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 2.3.3 See also the country policy and information note on [Iran: Background information, including actors of protection and internal relocation](#)

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## 2.4 Internal relocation

- 2.4.1 As the person's fear is of persecution or serious harm at the hands of the state, they will not be able to relocate to escape that risk.
- 2.4.2 For further guidance on internal relocation and factors to consider, see the, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 2.4.3 See also the country policy and information note on [Iran: Background information, including actors of protection and internal relocation](#)

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## 2.5 Certification

- 2.5.1 Where a claim made by a person born into the Zoroastrian faith is refused, it is likely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002. This is because the treatment feared even if it did materialise does not amount to persecution or serious harm.
- 2.5.2 Where a claim made by a person who claims to have converted from Islam to the Zoroastrian faith is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded'
- 2.5.3 For further guidance on certification, see [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 Zoroastrianism is an officially accepted religion according to the constitution.
- 3.1.2 Whilst people born into the Zoroastrian religion do face discrimination by the state, the reported number of those who have experienced such treatment are low and in general the level of discrimination faced by Zoroastrians is not sufficiently serious by its nature and repetition as to amount to persecution or serious harm. The onus will be on the person to demonstrate otherwise.
- 3.1.3 Traditional Zoroastrians do not accept converts into their faith, although some sections of the Zoroastrian faith do. The onus will be on a person to show that they have converted to Zoroastrianism and to have been accepted as such by the Zoroastrian faith.
- 3.1.4 Where a person has converted from Islam to the Zoroastrian faith and whose conversion is likely to come to the attention of the authorities, the person is likely to be at real risk of persecution on return to Iran.
- 3.1.5 Claims based solely on the person's Zoroastrian faith, are likely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002
- 3.1.6 Claims made by a person who claims to have converted from Islam to the Zoroastrian faith are unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

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# Country information

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## 4. Zoroastrians

### 4.1 Religious demography

- 4.1.1 The US government estimated the population of Iran as 81.8 million in July 2015, of which:

'Muslims constitute 99 percent of the population; 90-95 percent are Shia and 5-10 percent Sunni [...] According to U.S. government estimates, groups constituting the remaining 1 percent of the population include Bahais, Christians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis...

'According to Zoroastrian groups and the Statistical Centre of Iran, there are approximately 25,000 Zoroastrians.<sup>1</sup>

- 4.1.2 The Statistical Centre of Iran estimated in 2011 that there were approximately 25,300 Zoroastrians, who are primarily ethnic Persians; however, Zoroastrian groups report 60,000 members.<sup>2</sup>

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### 4.2 Legal and constitutional rights

- 4.2.1 The US State Department's 2015 International Religious Freedom report published on 10 August 2016 noted that:

'The constitution states Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities who, "within the limits of the law," have permission to perform religious rites and ceremonies and to form religious societies. They are also free to address personal affairs and religious education according to their own religious canon. The law bans these groups from proselytizing.

'Non-Muslims may not be elected to a representative body or hold senior government or military positions, with the exception of five of the 290 Majlis seats reserved by the constitution for religious minorities. There are two seats for Armenian Christians, one for Assyrian Christians, one for Jews, and one for Zoroastrians.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> US State Department, 'Report on International Religious Freedom for 2015', Iran, (Section I: Religious Demography), 10 August 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dliid=256265>. Accessed: 13 March 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Cordesman, AH 2016, Stability and Instability in the Gulf Region in 2016, Working draft, 15 June 2016 [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160615\\_Gulf\\_Stability\\_Instability.pdf?bcsi\\_scan\\_25ee14e37a8217d2=0&bcsi\\_scan\\_filename=160615\\_Gulf\\_Stability\\_Instability.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160615_Gulf_Stability_Instability.pdf?bcsi_scan_25ee14e37a8217d2=0&bcsi_scan_filename=160615_Gulf_Stability_Instability.pdf). Accessed: 14 March 2017

<sup>3</sup> US State Department, 2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iran, 10 August 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dliid=256265>. Accessed: 13 March 2017

### 4.3 The Zoroastrian faith

#### 4.3.1 In an article for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting titled 'Zoroastrians Face Uncertain Future in Iran' dated 30 June 2010 it was noted that:

'The Zoroastrians of Iran mostly speak an archaic form of Persian known as Dari (not to be confused with the Dari of Afghanistan). The Avesta, the Zoroastrian holy book, is written in the even older Avestan or Din Dabire, although few are familiar with the language or script today. Some pupils learn the basics of the ancient alphabet in Zoroastrian schools, but the curriculum is in modern Persian.'<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.3.2 An 'International Business Times' report, 'Iran's Religious Persecution: A Death-Knell to Zoroastrianism?', dated 15 November 2011, stated:

'[...] minority communities of Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are vulnerable to pressures of conversion, official retaliation and discriminatory practices in employment and education. Muslims who convert to any of these minority faiths can be executed for apostasy under Sharia law. [...] Being the oldest religious community of Iran, Zoroastrians have perhaps endured such religious hostilities for the longest time. Zoroaster, a prophet also known as Zarathustra, founded Zoroastrianism in Iran some 3,500 years ago. From the rise of the first Persian Empire under Cyrus in 559 B.C. to the fall of the Sassanids in 651 A.D., it was a major world religion.

'The Zoroastrians' situation in their homeland began deteriorating when the Arabs conquered Iran in the seventh century. Zoroastrians began migrating to the rest of the world, including to India, where they are called Parsis, and eventually to the United States and Australia.'<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.3.3 The Iran Primer article 'Iran Minorities 1: Diverse Religions' dated 3 September 2013 noted that:

'Zoroastrians are the oldest religious community in Iran. The faith was established sometime between 1800 and 1000 B.C. in Iran. It was the dominant faith during the Persian Empire and later became the state religion. It waned after the Arab Islamic conquest of Persia in the seventh century.

'Some of the basic Zoroastrian tenants include concepts of heaven and hell, resurrection, a supreme and universal God, divine creation, the spiritual nature of the world and humans, belief in the afterlife and the basic goodness of humanity. The Iranian new year Nowruz—originally a Zoroastrian tradition—is a state holiday in the Islamic Republic celebrated by all Iranians.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Zoroastrians Face Uncertain Future in Iran, 30 June 2010 <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/zoroastrians-face-uncertain-future-iran>. Accessed: 13 March 2017

<sup>5</sup> International Business Times, 'Iran's Religious Persecution: A Death-Knell to Zoroastrianism?', 15 November 2011 <http://www.ibtimes.com/irans-religious-persecution-death-knell-zoroastrianism-370018>. Accessed: 14 March 2017

<sup>6</sup> United States Institute of Peace, The Iran Primer, Iran Minorities 1: Diverse Religions, 3 September 2013 <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/sep/03/iran-minorities-1-diverse-religions>. Accessed: 13 March 2017

4.3.4 Middle East Eye noted in February 2016 that: 'From 600 BC to 650 AC, Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the Persian Empire. When the Arabs brought the Persian Empire to its knees at the end of the Sassanid dynasty, most Zoroastrians converted to Islam. A few of them escaped to India, and the smallest group stayed in Iran and preserved their faith.'<sup>7</sup>

4.3.5 The CIA world fact book describes Zoroastrianism as:

'Originating from the teachings of Zoroaster in about the 9th or 10th century B.C., Zoroastrianism may be the oldest continuing creedal religion. Its key beliefs center on a transcendent creator God, Ahura Mazda, and the concept of free will. The key ethical tenets of Zoroastrianism expressed in its scripture, the Avesta, are based on a dualistic worldview where one may prevent chaos if one chooses to serve God and exercises good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. Zoroastrianism is generally a closed religion and members are almost always born to Zoroastrian parents. Prior to the spread of Islam, Zoroastrianism dominated greater Iran. Today, though a minority, Zoroastrians remain primarily in Iran, India (where they are known as Parsi), and Pakistan.'<sup>8</sup>

4.3.6 For a full history of the Zoroastrian faith please see Encyclopaedia Iranica- Zoroastrianism ii. Historical Review: from the Arab Conquest to Modern Times.<sup>9</sup>

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#### 4.4 Worship and places of worship

4.4.1 According to the Zoroastrian Heritage website:

'Zoroastrian worship practices have evolved from ancient times to the present day. Traditionally, Zoroastrians worship individually at home, or in the open, facing a source of light. Zoroastrian scriptures do not prescribe worshipping in a temple and make no mention of Zoroastrian places of worship.

'In ancient times, historical records state than when the community gathered together for a religious event, they did so in open air gathering areas around a podium where a fire was lit. The gathering areas were on hillsides and hilltops.

'Over time, Zoroastrians developed the concept of worshipping in temples, sometimes called fire temples. The temples contain an inner sanctum (pavi) or platform where a fire is maintained or placed. This is because Zoroastrians face a source of light when they pray. In temples the source of

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<sup>7</sup> Middle East Eye, Zoroastrian village comes to life for ancient winter festival, 5 February 2016 <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/journey-heart-iran-zoroastrians-ancient-feast-1789877481>. Accessed: 28 February 2017

<sup>8</sup> CIA World Fact Book, References : Definitions and Notes- Religions, undated <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/docs/notesanddefs.html>. Accessed: 3 April 2017

<sup>9</sup> Encyclopaedia Iranica, 'Zoroastrianism ii. Historical Review: from the Arab Conquest to Modern Times', 22 January 2015 <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zoroastrianism-02-arab-conquest-to-modern>. Accessed: 14 March 2017

light is a flame maintained in a fire urn. In certain temples, this fire is kept burning continuously, representing an eternal flame.

'Nowadays, even with the advent of temples, worship or praying for Zoroastrians is primarily an individual endeavour at home or in the open, by the sea, on hill tops, or in some other suitable open setting.'<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.4.2 The BBC stated:

'Zoroaster placed less emphasis on ritual worship, instead focusing on the central ethics of 'Good Words, Good Thoughts and Good Deeds'.

'Zoroastrian worship is not prescriptive. Its followers can choose whether they wish to pray and how.

Communal worship is usually centred around seasonal festivals (of which the Zoroastrians have many), but there are other opportunities for worshipers to gather, such as the Navjote, the initiation ceremony where a child is accepted into the Zoroastrian fellowship.

'Zoroastrians traditionally pray several times a day. Some wear a kusti, which is a cord knotted three times, to remind them of the maxim, 'Good Words, Good Thoughts, Good Deeds'. They wrap the kusti around the outside of a sudreh, a long, clean, white cotton shirt. They may engage in a purification ritual, such as the washing of the hands, then untie and then retie it while reciting prayers.

'Prayers are primarily in vocational, calling upon and celebrating Ahura Mazda and his good essence that runs through all things. Prayers are said facing the sun, fire or other source of light representing Ahura Mazda's divine light and energy.

'Purification is strongly emphasised in Zoroastrian rituals. Zoroastrians focus on keeping their minds, bodies and environments pure in the quest to defeat evil (Angra Mainyu). Fire is seen as the supreme symbol of purity, and sacred fires are maintained in Fire Temples (Agiaries). These fires represent the light of God (Ahura Mazda) as well as the illuminated mind, and are never extinguished. No Zoroastrian ritual or ceremony is performed without the presence of a sacred fire.'<sup>11</sup>

#### 4.4.3 A 2015 article published on Encyclopaedia Iranica states that Zoroastrians 'worship at their fire temples in Tehran, Yazd, Kerman [...] and Isfahan.'<sup>12</sup>

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## 4.5 Conversion to the Zoroastrian faith

### 4.5.1 The Zarathushtrian (Zoroastrian) Assembly website in their FAQ section states the following regarding conversion to Zoroastrianism:

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<sup>10</sup> Zoroastrian Heritage, Zoroastrian Worship, undated <http://heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/worship/>. Accessed: 16 March 2017

<sup>11</sup> BBC Religions. Zoroastrian Worship. Last updated 2 October 2009 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian/worship/worship.shtml>. Accessed: 16 March 2017

<sup>12</sup> Encyclopaedia Iranica, 'Zoroastrianism ii. Historical Review: from the Arab Conquest to Modern Times', 22 January 2015 <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zoroastrianism-02-arab-conquest-to-modern>

'It is only the "Traditionalist" Parsis (member of a group of followers in India of the Iranian prophet Zoroaster) who do not believe in conversion and acceptance. For them, only a person born of Zoroastrian parents is "Zoroastrian" because they believe that religion is pre-destined by God. Some of them now accept a child born of Zoroastrian father and non-Zoroastrian mother. Some reformists accept a child born of Zoroastrian mother and non-Zoroastrian father. Others accept converts from any religion or belief. However, none of the reformist schools are active missionaries.'<sup>13</sup>

4.5.2 The Boston Review published an article titled 'Iran's other religion' in 2003 in it they stated that:

'While Islam is aggressive in proselytizing itself, it bans, by punishment of death, the conversion of Muslims into other faiths. Making matters more complex for those Iranians looking to return to their "original faith" is that the faith itself does not seem to want them. "There can be no conversion into our religion," says Sohrab Yazdani, a leading member of the Zarathusti community in the city of Yazd, home to most of Iran's surviving Zarathustis and their religion's sacred sites.

'Having lived as a persecuted minority for more than 1,300 years, Iran's Zarathustis have formed a tightly knit and closed community. Few want to risk incurring the Iranian government's wrath [...]. Complicating the theological landscape is the notion that being Zarathusti, like being Jewish, is a matter of birth, not conversion. Any challenge to this closed community of faith is fiercely rejected by most Zarathustis in both Iran and India. The one movement to convert Iranians and others into Zoroastrianism, started by an Iranian named Ali Jaffery, has run afoul of both the Islamic authorities in Iran and the mainstream Zarathusti community.'<sup>14</sup>

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## 4.6 Mixed marriages (between Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians)

4.6.1 The Institute for War and Peace Reporting article on Zoroastrians dated 30 June 2010 noted that:

'Conservative Parsis oppose marriage outside the faith and do not recognise the children of such unions as Zoroastrian. This naturally leads to a net loss of community members over the years.'

'Rostam Vahidi, a Zoroastrian priest who emigrated to the United States a few years ago and now lives in California stated that 'the country's Zoroastrian clerics have for century's characterised marriage with outsiders as "religiously problematic". Priests in Iran remain reticent on the issue. But in Vahidi's view, "The Zoroastrian Priests Association is not against such marriages and nowhere in the Avesta is marriage with non-Zoroastrians prohibited." He believes that such marriages were common even before the arrival of Islam. These days, the problem such marriages pose is that they

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<sup>13</sup> The Zarathushtrian Assembly, FAQ's, undated <http://www.zoroastrian.org/other/faq.htm>. Accessed: 14 March 2017

<sup>14</sup> Boston Review, Iran's other religion, Summer 2003 <http://bostonreview.net/archives/BR28.3/pocha.html>. Accessed: 14 March 2017

can throw up legal problems, since Iranian law tolerates indigenous non-Muslim groups only as long as they do not proselytise.

“The Islamic government exerts so much pressure on the Zoroastrian association and its priests to refrain from religious dissemination that, in order to protect ourselves, we are forced to use tactics that prevent marriage with non-Zoroastrians.”<sup>15</sup>

- 4.6.2 Richard Foltz explained the implications of mixed religious marriages between Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian spouses in his 2013 book, ‘Religions of Iran’:

‘While in the West it is not unheard of for non-Zoroastrian spouses to join the faith or at least allow their children to have a Zoroastrian upbringing, in Iran (where the non-Zoroastrian spouse is almost sure to be a Muslim) Islamic law ensures that this will not be the case. Thus, at least officially, a Zoroastrian who marries a Muslim is permanently lost to the community, along with his or her eventual children, whether they like it or not. And although some mixed couples do make the choice to maintain a Zoroastrian religious culture within the home, it is not generally possible for them to make this choice public, and the Zoroastrian community cannot formally accept them as members. Within Iran’s Zoroastrian community today, the attitude towards out-marriage appears to be mostly one of reluctant resignation. It is viewed with disfavour, but accepted as unavoidable. Families would prefer to see their children marry within the community, but have little power to stop those who choose otherwise.’<sup>16</sup>

- 4.6.3 The Atlantic website noted that: ‘Zoroastrianism is a patriarchal tradition, so the children of Zoroastrian women who marry outside the faith are not accepted, and even shunned, in many communities. Meanwhile, children of Zoroastrian men who intermarry are likelier to be accepted.’<sup>17</sup>

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## 5. State treatment

- 5.1.1 In an article for the Institute for War and Peace titled ‘Zoroastrians Face Uncertain Future in Iran’ dated 30 June 2010 it was noted that:

‘For centuries, Zoroastrians in Muslim Iran have seen their property and land arbitrarily confiscated. This has intensified and taken on new forms under the Islamic regime. By law, Zoroastrians are not allowed to open new fire temples or other religious buildings.

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<sup>15</sup> Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Zoroastrians Face Uncertain Future in Iran, 30 June 2010 <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/zoroastrians-face-uncertain-future-iran>. Accessed: 14 March 2017

<sup>16</sup> ACCORD 2015, Iran: Freedom of Religion; Treatment of Religious and Ethnic Minorities, 28 September 2015, p.51 [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/90\\_1443443478\\_accord-iran-coi-compilation-september-2015.pdf?bcsi\\_scan\\_ed0844b1f0a80d2=fqTlrgtKd5Vtm/PwUezb9sURMlMAAAAI12hUw==&bcsi\\_scan\\_filename=90\\_1443443478\\_accord-iran-coi-compilation-september-2015.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/90_1443443478_accord-iran-coi-compilation-september-2015.pdf?bcsi_scan_ed0844b1f0a80d2=fqTlrgtKd5Vtm/PwUezb9sURMlMAAAAI12hUw==&bcsi_scan_filename=90_1443443478_accord-iran-coi-compilation-september-2015.pdf). Accessed: 14 March 2017

<sup>17</sup> The Atlantic, Dating to Save Your Tiny Religion From Extinction, 27 March 2016 <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2016/03/marriage-and-zoroastrian/475467/>. Accessed: 13 March 2017

'Until this year [2010], the Zoroastrian association in the capital Tehran was allowed to use the school premises it owns for religious ceremonies outside working hours, but this has now been banned. Zoroastrian schools are legally classed as "endowments", property of the community. By law, though, all religious minority schools operate under government supervision. To compensate for this management, the government pays the Zoroastrian association a fee as rent for the property, but this leaves Muslim officials with a major say in how the schools are used.

"Unlike previously, the association is no longer allowed to use its property after hours for religious ceremonies," said Rostam Vahidi, a Zoroastrian priest who emigrated to the United States a few years ago and now lives in California. "The government has offered no good reason for this."<sup>18</sup>

5.1.2 An International Business Times report, 'Iran's Religious Persecution: A Death-Knell to Zoroastrianism?', dated 15 November 2011, noted:

'Zoroastrians in Iran are more or less alienated from the political affairs of their own country. According to the International Federation for Human Rights, a number of legal provisions in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran - its Penal Code as well as its Civil Code - explicitly discriminate against all non-Muslims. According to the Constitution, non-Muslims cannot hold government offices at high levels, including that of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran; a candidate, according to Article 1156, must be a Shi'a Muslim (Article 1156). Additionally, non-Muslims cannot be Commanders in the Islamic Army (Article 1447) or Judges, at any level, the FIDH explains.

'With only one seat allotted for Zoroastrians in the Islamic Consultative Assembly - Iranian parliament - they are unable to play a role in mainstream politics. Moreover, Zoroastrians are totally excluded from selection through general elections and cannot become members of the powerful Guardian Council.'<sup>19</sup>

5.1.3 In a Georgetown Journal of International Affairs article titled 'Iran vs. Its people: abuses against religious minorities' dated 20 June 2013 it was noted that:

'Like Christians, members of Iran's Zoroastrian community are considered protected religious minorities yet suffer increased repression and discrimination. In August 2011, a Zoroastrian man, Mohsen Sadeghipour, began serving a four-and-a-half year prison term after being charged and convicted of propaganda of the Zoroastrian faith. Several of his relatives were convicted and imprisoned in 2010 on blasphemy and other charges.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Institute for War and Peace reporting, Zoroastrians Face Uncertain Future in Iran, 30 June 2010 <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/zoroastrians-face-uncertain-future-iran>. Accessed: 13 March 2017

<sup>19</sup> International Business Times, 'Iran's Religious Persecution: A Death-Knell to Zoroastrianism?', 15 November 2011, <http://www.ibtimes.com/irans-religious-persecution-death-knell-zoroastrianism-370018>. Accessed: 14 March 2017

<sup>20</sup> Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, Iran vs. Its people: abuses against religious minorities by Katrina Lantos Swett, 20 June 2013, <http://journal.georgetown.edu/iran-vs-its-people-abuses-against-religious-minorities-by-katrina-lantos-swett/>. Accessed: 13 March 2017

- 5.1.4 The US Institute of Peace article 'Iran Minorities 1: Diverse Religions' dated 3 September 2013 noted that:

'In November 2005, Ayatollah Ahmed Jannati, chairman of Guardian Council, referred to Iran's religious minorities as, "sinful animals who roam the earth and engage in corruption." Kourosh Niknam—the Zoroastrian member of parliament at the time—protested Jannati's comments. Niknam faced a revolutionary court and was threatened with execution. He was released with a warning. Niknam was succeeded by Esfandiyar Ekhtiyari in the 2008 Majles elections.'<sup>21</sup>

- 5.1.5 In its April 2016 country information report for Iran, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) stated that it has: 'little specific information in relation to the treatment of Zoroastrians in Iran'.[...] Minority religious communities in Iran are divided into "recognised" religions and "non-recognised" religions. The Constitution provides for protection for the rights of certain religious faiths – Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity – as the "only recognised religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education".

'[...] The Constitution grants the recognised religious minorities the freedom to form associations, freedom of opinion and privacy of opinion. Adherents of these religions are permitted to hold religious services, run places of worship and religious schools and celebrate religious holidays. They also have five reserved positions in Parliament (two for Armenian Christians, and one each for Assyrian Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians). Adherents of the recognised minority religions face some constraints in the ability to practice their beliefs, but DFAT assess are generally able to live without undue interference by the state or society.'<sup>22</sup>

- 5.1.6 The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report 2016 published on 2 May 2016 noted that:

'Since his 2013 election, President Hassan Rouhani has not delivered on his campaign promises to strengthen civil liberties for religious minorities. Government actions continued to result in physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests, and imprisonment. Even some of the constitutionally-recognized non-Muslim minorities – Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians – face harassment, intimidation, discrimination, arrests, and imprisonment.

'In recent years, members of the Zoroastrian community have come under increasing repression and discrimination. At least four Zoroastrians were

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<sup>21</sup> US Institute of Peace, The Iran Primer, Iran Minorities 1: Diverse Religions, 3 September 2013 <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/sep/03/iran-minorities-1-diverse-religions>. Accessed: 13 March 2017

<sup>22</sup> Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2016, DFAT Country Information Report Iran, 21 April, available on request.. Accessed: 14 March 2017

convicted in 2011 for propaganda of their faith, blasphemy, and other trumped-up charges remain in prison.<sup>23</sup>

5.1.7 The US State Department's International Religious Freedom report published in August 2016 noted that:

'According to the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre database of prisoners, at least 380 religious practitioners remained imprisoned at the end of the year for their membership in or activities on behalf of a minority religious group, including approximately 250 Sunnis, 82 Bahais, 26 Christian converts, 16 Sufis, 10 Yarsanis, three Sunni converts, and two Zoroastrians.'<sup>24</sup>

5.1.8 In December 2016 the Centre for Human rights in Iran reported on an Iranian dual national and his wife of Zoroastrian faith who had been arrested in August 2016 and charged with 'organizing mixed-gender parties for foreign diplomats and their Iranian associates and serving alcohol at their home.'<sup>25</sup>

5.1.9 The same report went on to note that no mention was made that the arrested couple are Zoroastrian and 'therefore not subject to Islamic laws on alcohol and mixed gatherings. Under Iran's Constitution, Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians 'are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.'<sup>26</sup>

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## 6. Societal treatment

6.1.1 The Institute for War and Peace noted that: 'Where no special schools are available or pupil numbers are too low, Zoroastrians often attend Iranian state schools. They are allowed to opt out of classes on Islam and instead take courses led by Zoroastrian teachers, using textbooks approved by the priests' association. But attending a Muslim school can leave Zoroastrians isolated and discriminated against.'<sup>27</sup>

6.1.2 The Iran Primer article 'Iran Minorities 1: Diverse Religions' dated 3 September 2013 noted that:

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<sup>23</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report 2016 - Tier 1 CPCs designated by the State Department and recommended by USCIRF - Iran, 2 May 2016 <http://www.uscifr.gov/countries/iran#government-correspondence>. Accessed: 13 March 2017

<sup>24</sup> US State Department, 2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Iran, 10 August 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dliid=256265>. Accessed: 13 March 2017

<sup>25</sup> Centre for Human Rights in Iran, Sister Breaks the Silence Over Iranian-American and Wife Held for Three Months Without Charge or Counsel, 2 December 2016 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2016/12/karan-vafadari-afarin-neyssari-arrest/>. Accessed: 14 March 2017

<sup>26</sup> Centre for Human Rights in Iran, Sister Breaks the Silence Over Iranian-American and Wife Held for Three Months Without Charge or Counsel, 2 December 2016 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2016/12/karan-vafadari-afarin-neyssari-arrest/>. Accessed: 14 March 2017

<sup>27</sup> Institute for War and Peace, Zoroastrians Face Uncertain Future in Iran, 30 June 2010 <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/zoroastrians-face-uncertain-future-iran>. Accessed: 13 March 2017

'In recent years, some Iranians have adopted Zoroastrian symbols and traditions to celebrate Iranian culture that pre-dates Islam. In January 2013, some 2,000 people – reportedly including Muslims -- attended a Zoroastrian winter festival called Sadeh. One Muslim who attended the festival explained that it should not be seen only as a religious festival. "Sadeh is an ancient celebration that symbolizes Iran's rich cultural heritage. There is no reason why Iranian Muslims shouldn't observe the event," he reportedly said.

'Iran's Zoroastrian population faces decline due to emigration, conversion to Islam, harassment and discrimination. The Iranian media has portrayed Zoroastrians as devil worshipers and polytheists. Some Zoroastrians do not identify their religious background, fearing persecution.'<sup>28</sup>

6.1.3 The Huffington Post reported in June 2014 that:

'Noruz (also known as Jamshedi or Jamshidi Noruz) is the seventh obligatory feast and it is dedicated to fire. It is the Zoroastrian New Year celebration, and occurs on the spring equinox. Noruz is so deeply embedded in Iranian culture that it is still celebrated as the Iranian New Year in Islamic Iran, although without the religious connotations. Many fires are lit and there is feasting and celebrations. In modern times fireworks have also become part of the festivities.'<sup>29</sup>

6.1.4 A 2015 article published on Encyclopaedia Iranica also states that Zoroastrians experience discrimination in Iran with regard to conversion, criminal law and employment:

'Despite being officially recognized as a minority and represented in public settings, Zoroastrians often are offered only limited protection on a daily basis from their Muslim neighbours. As a result, they sporadically have been targets for persecution. Community records list cases of Zoroastrian women being compelled to marry Muslim men in the presence of Shi'ite mollās "clerics" and to publicly adopt Islam. More important, on a daily basis, are renewed legal distinctions between Muslims and Zoroastrians, which echo ordinances that Zoroastrians experienced under earlier Islamic regimes. A Zoroastrian who converts to Islam is regarded by Iranian law as the sole inheritor of his or her family's assets. A Zoroastrian who even accidentally causes the demise of a Muslim faces the possibility of capital punishment, but not vice versa. The concept that Zoroastrians are najes "unclean," has been revived. Chronic unemployment has become prevalent among Zoroastrians of both genders due to discrimination. Consequently Zoroastrians have begun leaving Iran yet again, immigrating to countries in North America and Europe.'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The Iran Primer, Iran Minorities 1: Diverse Religions, 3 September 2013 <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/sep/03/iran-minorities-1-diverse-religions>. Accessed: 13 March 2017

<sup>29</sup> The Huffington Post, Zoroastrians Celebrate Noruz In Parliament, 4 June 2014 [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/jasmine-dotiwala/zoroastrians-celebrate-noruz\\_b\\_5090199.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/jasmine-dotiwala/zoroastrians-celebrate-noruz_b_5090199.html). Accessed: 14 March 2017

<sup>30</sup> Encyclopaedia Iranica, 'Zoroastrianism ii. Historical Review: from the Arab Conquest to Modern Times', 22 January 2015 <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zoroastrianism-02-arab-conquest-to-modern>

## 7. Zoroastrian organisations in the UK

- 7.1.1 The World Zoroastrian Organisation (WZO) has its headquarters in the United Kingdom with registered charitable status in the UK, India, USA and New Zealand. The WZO also has regional representatives in Pakistan, Singapore and Canada. The WZO postal address is 135 Tennison Road South Norwood London SE25 5NF.<sup>31</sup>
- 7.1.2 Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe (ZTFE) represents the interest of the Zoroastrian community with the UK Government, interfaith, religious and educational institutions. It serves the community in Europe both at national and international levels. The ZTFE postal address is 440 Alexandra Avenue, Harrow, HA2 9TL.<sup>32</sup>
- 7.1.3 North West Zoroastrian Community (NWZC) is a non profit based Zoroastrian organisation based in the North West of the United Kingdom.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The World Zoroastrian Organisation (WZO), About WZO, undated <https://www.w-z-o.org/>. Accessed: 3 April 2017

<sup>32</sup> Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe (ZTFE), About us, undated <http://www.ztfe.com/>. Accessed: 3 April 2017

<sup>33</sup> North West Zoroastrian Community (NWZC), Home page, undated <http://www.nwzc.org.uk/>. Accessed: 3 April 2017

# Version control and contacts

## Contacts

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

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## Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **1.0**
- valid from **14 June 2017**

## Changes from last version of this note

First version in CPIN format.

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