



Home Office

# **Country Policy and Information Note** **Iran: Christians and Christian converts**

**Version 5.0**

**May 2019**

# Preface

## Purpose

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and analysis of COI for use by Home Office decision makers handling particular types of protection and human rights claims (as set out in [the basis of claim](#) section). It is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of a particular subject or theme.

It is split into two main sections: (1) analysis and assessment of COI and other evidence; and (2) COI. These are explained in more detail below.

## Assessment

This section analyses the evidence relevant to this note – i.e. the COI section; refugee/human rights laws and policies; and applicable caselaw – by describing this and its inter-relationships, and provides an assessment on whether, **in general**:

- A person is reasonably likely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm
- A person is able to obtain protection from the state (or quasi state bodies)
- A person is reasonably able to relocate within a country or territory
- Claims are likely to justify granting asylum, humanitarian protection or other form of leave, and
- If a claim is refused, it is likely or unlikely to be certifiable as ‘clearly unfounded’ under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers **must**, however, still consider all claims on an individual basis, taking into account each case’s specific facts.

## Country of origin information

The country information in this note has been carefully selected in accordance with the general principles of COI research as set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), dated April 2008, and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation’s (ACCORD), [Researching Country Origin Information – Training Manual, 2013](#). Namely, taking into account the COI’s relevance, reliability, accuracy, balance, currency, transparency and traceability.

The structure and content of the country information section follows a [terms of reference](#) which sets out the general and specific topics relevant to this note.

All information included in the note was published or made publicly available on or before the ‘cut-off’ date(s) in the country information section. Any event taking place or report/article published after these date(s) is not included.

All information is publicly accessible or can be made publicly available, and is from generally reliable sources. Sources and the information they provide are carefully considered before inclusion.

Factors relevant to the assessment of the reliability of sources and information include:

- the motivation, purpose, knowledge and experience of the source
- how the information was obtained, including specific methodologies used
- the currency and detail of information, and
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources.

Multiple sourcing is used to ensure that the information is accurate, balanced and corroborated, so that a comprehensive and up-to-date picture at the time of publication is provided of the issues relevant to this note.

Information is compared and contrasted, whenever possible, to provide a range of views and opinions. The inclusion of a source, however, is not an endorsement of it or any view(s) expressed.

Each piece of information is referenced in a brief footnote; full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the [bibliography](#).

## 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 support him in reviewing the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of approach of COI produced by the Home Office.

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. The IAGCI may be contacted at:

### **Independent Advisory Group on Country Information**

Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration

5th Floor

Globe House

89 Eccleston Square

London, SW1V 1PN

Email: [chiefinspector@icibi.gov.uk](mailto:chiefinspector@icibi.gov.uk)

Information about the IAGCI's work and a list of the documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector's pages of the [gov.uk website](#).

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# Assessment

Updated: 16 April 2019

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Basis of claim

#### 1.1.1 Fear of persecution by the state because the person:

- is a Christian; or
- has converted to Christianity from another religion (or no religion) and/or
- actively seeks to convert others to Christianity.

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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](#)).

### 2.2 Exclusion

#### 2.2.1 Decision makers must consider whether one (or more) of the exclusion clauses is applicable. Each case must be considered on its individual facts and merits.

#### 2.2.2 If the person is excluded from the Refugee Convention, they will also be excluded from a grant of humanitarian protection.

#### 2.2.3 For further guidance on the exclusion clauses and restricted leave, see the Asylum Instructions on [Exclusion under Articles 1F and 33\(2\) of the Refugee Convention](#), [Humanitarian Protection](#) and [Restricted Leave](#).

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### 2.3 Convention reason

#### 2.3.1 Actual or imputed religion.

#### 2.3.2 Establishing a convention reason alone is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question to be addressed in each case is whether the particular person will face a real risk of persecution on account of their actual or imputed convention reason.

#### 2.3.3 For further guidance on Convention reasons and particular social groups, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.4 Risk

### a. Those born into the Christian religion

- 2.4.1 The Iranian Constitution recognises Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities. However, the state discriminates against them on the basis of religion or belief as all laws and regulations are based on unique Shi'a Islamic criteria. Many Christians face difficulties living freely and openly in Iran, with the Iranian authorities regularly monitoring registered congregation centres and attendees (see [Application of the law in practice](#)).
- 2.4.2 In general, the level of discrimination faced by Christians born into the religion, who are not actively evangelising, is not sufficiently serious in its nature and frequency as to amount to persecution or serious harm.
- 2.4.3 Where the person has come to the attention of the authorities previously for reasons other than their religion, then, depending on the nature of the previous interest, that in combination with their religion, may put them at increased risk. Each case must be considered on its facts.

### b. Evangelical/house churches

- 2.4.4 Members of evangelical/house churches are subject to harassment, arrest, close surveillance and imprisonment by the Iranian authorities (see [House churches](#) and [Application of the law in practice](#)).
- 2.4.5 Christians who can demonstrate that they have, either in Iran or in the UK, practised evangelical or proselytising activities and will continue to do so on return to Iran because of their affiliation to evangelical churches, or that they would wear in public outward manifestations of their faith such as a visible crucifix, may attract the adverse notice of the authorities on return to Iran and will be at risk of persecution.

### c. Christian converts

- 2.4.6 Christians who have converted from Islam 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 a person to change their religious affiliation on personal documentation. There are reports of some Christian converts (and sometimes their family members) facing physical attacks, harassment, threats, surveillance, arrest, detention, as well as torture and ill-treatment in detention.
- 2.4.7 While there are reports of Christian converts being arrested by the Iranian authorities, the number of arrests are statistically very low when comparing them to the overall number of Christians and converts in Iran. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the Iranian authorities appear to target the leaders and organisers of house churches rather than 'ordinary' converts (i.e. those who are not active evangelisers). This suggests that the Iranian authorities are primarily concerned with stopping the spread of the Christianity and do not have the resources to monitor all Christian converts.
- 2.4.8 In the country guidance case of [SZ and JM \(Christians – FS confirmed\) Iran CG \[2008\] UKAIT 00082](#) (heard on 13 -15 May 2008 and promulgated on 12 November 2008) the Upper Tribunal held that conditions for converts to sacrament-based churches may be such that they could not reasonably be

expected to return to Iran (summary headnote). This is because such churches, primarily Catholic, require regular attendance at mass and participation in the sacraments (para 99).

- 2.4.9 SZ and JM when confirming [FS and others](#) (heard 16/17 March 2004 and promulgated 17 November 2004) quoted paragraph 189: 'We would regard the more active convert, Pastor, church leader, proselytiser or evangelist as being at a real risk. Their higher profile and role would be more likely to attract the malevolence of the licensed zealot and the serious adverse attention of the theocratic state when it sought, as it will do on some occasions, to repress conversions from Islam which it sees as a menace and an affront to the state and God.' (para 6).
- 2.4.10 As regards 'ordinary' converts (i.e. those who are not active evangelisers), the Tribunal held that there is a risk, but not a real risk, of serious harm if returned to Iran (para 148).
- 2.4.11 Although both these country guidance cases were heard over 10 years' ago the available country evidence indicates that the findings remain valid.
- 2.4.12 In December 2017, in the case of [A. v. Switzerland](#), the ECtHR confirmed that converts who have not come to the attention of the authorities, including for reasons other than their conversion, and who practised their faith discreetly, do not face a real risk of ill-treatment upon return. At paragraph 29 of the judgement the ECtHR referred to the CPIN of February 2017 to inform their approach. This position is similar to that of the Swiss (and also Sweden and the Netherlands), and has been considered by their domestic courts.
- 2.4.13 Simply converting to Christianity is not considered enough to put a person at real risk of persecution. The convert's actions and activities and the degree to which their conversion is 'visible' will determine whether or not they would be at real risk. Those who have converted from Islam and whose conversion is likely to come to the attention of the authorities in Iran through evangelical or proselytising activities are likely to be at real risk of persecution on return. In addition, those who have previously come to the adverse attention of the authorities for other reasons may, depending on the nature of the adverse attention, are likely to be at real risk of persecution (see [Activities which could attract attention from the authorities](#)).
- 2.4.14 A number of Iranians convert to Christianity and get baptised while in Europe. Some sources suggest that a person who has converted to Christianity abroad and returned to Iran would only be at risk if the authorities previously had an interest in their activities in Iran, or if the convert would engage in evangelical or proselytising activities. Because of a general government suspicion of contact with the outside world those persons who convert whilst abroad may be seen as more of a threat than those who have converted whilst in Iran (see [Treatment of returning Christians to Iran](#)).
- 2.4.15 Those persons who return to Iran having converted while abroad and who do not actively seek to influence others to convert to Christianity, who consider their religion a personal matter and who are unlikely to seek to express in



public their faith, are likely to be able to continue practising Christianity discreetly.

- 2.4.16 In cases where the person will be discreet about their religion on return, the reasons for such discretion need to be considered in the light of [HJ \(Iran\)](#). Decision makers should take account of how the person has practised their religion whilst in the UK. A person should not be expected to conceal 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 conceal 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. Each case must be considered on its facts.

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## 2.5 Protection

- 2.5.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution from the state, they will not be able to avail themselves of the protection of the authorities.
- 2.5.2 For further guidance on assessing the availability of state protection, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.6 Internal relocation

- 2.6.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution from the state, in the majority of cases they will not be able to relocate to escape that risk.
- 2.6.2 In line with the findings in [AS \(Iran\) v The Secretary of State for the Home Department \[2017\] EWCA Civ 1539 \(12 October 2017\)](#) where a person does not actively seek to proselytise and considers their religion a personal matter, internal relocation to an area where they would not be known as a convert may be an option. Each case must be considered on its facts.
- 2.6.3 For further guidance on internal relocation and the factors to be considered, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.7 Certification

- 2.7.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.
- 2.7.2 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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# Country information

Section 3 updated: 08 April 2019

## 3. Religious demography

- 3.1.1 The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook, noted that Iran has an estimated population of 83,024,745 million (July 2018 est.). A 2011 estimate by the same source states that 99.4% of the population are Muslim (Shia 90-95%, Sunni 5-10%), 0.3% are 'other' religions (including Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian) and 0.4% of the population are an 'unspecified religion'<sup>1</sup>.
- 3.1.2 UN data from 2016 suggested that there are 79,598,054 Muslims in Iran, 9,826 Jews and 23,109 Zoroastrians<sup>2</sup>.

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Section 4 updated: 11 March 2019

## 4. Numbers of Christians in Iran

- 4.1.1 A 2013 International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) report cited the World Christian Database (WCD) in 2010 as having reported approximately 66,700 Protestant Christians in Iran, which represent[ed] about 25 percent of the Iranian Christian community.<sup>3</sup> [c.260,000]
- 4.1.2 UN data from 2011 suggested that the number of Christians in Iran was 117,704<sup>4</sup>. The same source put the 2016 figure at 130,158<sup>5</sup>.
- 4.1.3 Open Doors, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 8 August 2017, stated that many converts do not publicly report their faith due to persecution, so it is difficult to record the exact numbers of Iranian Christian converts. Open Doors believes the number to be 800,000, although this is a conservative estimate. Other estimates put the number between 400,000-500,000 right up to 3 million<sup>6</sup>.
- 4.1.4 The US State Department's Religious Freedom Report for 2018, covering events in 2017 ('the USSD IRF report for 2017') noted the differing estimates of Christians in Iran. They cite different sources as quoting figures ranging from 117,700 to 300-350,000 or up to as many as one million<sup>7</sup>.
- 4.1.5 An October 2018 Christian Post article<sup>8</sup>, also cited the Open Doors estimate<sup>9</sup> of nearly 800,000 Christians in Iran.
- 4.1.6 A March 2019 US Congressional Research Service report on Iran put the figure at 'about 300,000'<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> CIA World Factbook, 'Iran – people and society', last updated 3 April 2019, [url](#)

<sup>2</sup> UN Statistics Division, [url](#)

<sup>3</sup> ICHRI, 'The Cost of Faith ...', 16 January 2013, [url](#).

<sup>4</sup> UN Statistics Division, [url](#).

<sup>5</sup> UN Statistics Division, [url](#).

<sup>6</sup> Open Doors, 'Interview with CPIT, UK Home Office', 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

<sup>7</sup> USSD, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2017', 29 May 2018, [url](#)

<sup>8</sup> Christian Post, 'Iran is witnessing 'One of fastest growing church movements'', 16 October 2018, [url](#)

<sup>9</sup> Open Doors, 'World Watch List', u/d, [url](#)

<sup>10</sup> US CRS, 'Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options', 6 March 2019, [url](#).

See also: [Rise of the house church](#).

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Section 5 updated: 9 April 2019

## 5. Legal framework

### 5.1 General

#### 5.1.1 The USSD IRF report for events in 2017 stated that:

‘The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic, and Ja’afari Shia Islam to be the official state religion. The constitution stipulates all laws and regulations must be based on “Islamic criteria” and official interpretation of sharia. The constitution states citizens shall enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, “in conformity with Islamic criteria.”

‘The constitution states the investigation of an individual’s ideas is forbidden, and no one may be “subjected to questioning and aggression for merely holding an opinion.” The law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The only recognized conversions are from another religion to Islam. Apostasy from Islam is a crime punishable by death. Under the law, a child born to a Muslim father is considered to be Muslim.

‘By law, non-Muslims may not engage in public persuasion or attempted conversion of Muslims. These activities are considered proselytizing and punishable by death. In addition, citizens who are not recognized as Christians, Zoroastrians, or Jews may not engage in public religious expression, such as worshiping in a church, or wearing religious symbols such as a cross. Some exceptions are made for foreigners belonging to unrecognized religious groups.

‘The penal code specifies the death sentence for moharebeh (enmity against God), fisd fil-arz (“corruption on earth,” which includes apostasy or heresy), and sabb al-nabi (“insulting the prophets” or “insulting the sanctities”). According to the penal code, the application of the death penalty varies depending on the religion of both the perpetrator and the victim.’<sup>11</sup>

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### 5.2 Religious minorities

#### 5.2.1 The USSD IRF report for 2017 explained that ‘Citizens who are members of one of the recognized religious minorities [Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians] must register with the authorities. Registration conveys certain rights, including the use of alcohol for religious purposes. Failure of churchgoers to register and attendance at churches by unregistered individuals may subject a church to closure and arrest of its leaders by the authorities.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2017’, 29 May 2018, [url](#)

<sup>12</sup> USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2017’, 29 May 2018, [url](#)

- 5.2.2 Furthermore, the report states that ‘[a]ny citizen who is not a registered member of one of these three groups, or who cannot prove that his or her family was Christian prior to 1979, is considered Muslim.’<sup>13</sup>

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### 5.3 Christian converts

- 5.3.1 The USSD IRF for 2017 further stated:

‘Since the law prohibits citizens from converting from Islam to another religion, the government only recognizes the Christianity of citizens who are Armenian or Assyrian Christians, since the presence of these groups in the country predates Islam, or of citizens who can prove they or their families were Christian prior to the 1979 revolution. The government also recognizes Sabean-Mandaeans as Christian, even though the Sabean-Mandaeans do not consider themselves as such [...] The government does not recognize evangelical Protestants as Christian.

[...] Individuals who convert to Christianity are not recognized as Christian under the law. They may not register and are not entitled to the same rights as recognized members of Christian communities.’<sup>14</sup>

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Section 6 updated: 23 April 2019

## 6. Christian converts

### 6.1 Conversions in Europe

- 6.1.1 A fact-finding mission (FFM) report published in February 2013 by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS), Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and Norwegian Landinfo service interviewed several sources about Christians. The report stated that a number of Iranians had travelled to Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan in order to be baptised<sup>15</sup>.

- 6.1.2 The same report further noted:

‘However, the source [an elder from the International Protestant Church of Ankara] stated that there are also many Iranians who come to Turkey in order to get baptized. He mentioned an event in Konya about two years ago when 50 people had been baptized over a weekend by an American pastor who flew in from Las Vegas. The source said that this pastor had issued certificates of baptism to people he did not know. According to an elder from the International Protestant Church of Ankara, such baptism events that include large numbers of people take place “all the time” in Turkey. There are a lot of conferences in Istanbul where people, including many Iranians, get baptized after attending for 1-2 days.

‘An elder from the International Protestant Church of Ankara further informed the delegation that in his church (in Ankara), it would take a 22-week course of introduction to the Christian faith prior to being baptized. According to the source, his church is running 2-3 courses per year with 20 persons in each

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<sup>13</sup> USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2017’, 29 May 2018, [url](#)

<sup>14</sup> USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2017’, 29 May 2018, [url](#)

<sup>15</sup> DIS, DRC and Landinfo, FFM Report, February 2013, [url](#)

class. He added that approximately half of the individuals signing up complete the course, and mentioned that in the latest class, only five out of 20 finished. Concerning those who are baptized, a small amount have returned to Iran, most have gone to another country and the rest have stayed in Turkey.’<sup>16</sup>

- 6.1.3 An August 2017 article by Kurdish media company, Rudaw, reported on some 500 Christian converts who had sought asylum in Turkey. The article explained

‘Of those Rudaw talked to in Turkey’s Van, close to the Iranian border — all Kurds — none revealed their name and some chose not to appear on camera for fear of reprisals.

[...]

He said that hundreds of Kurdish youth in Iran have abandoned Islam and embraced Christianity.’<sup>17</sup>

- 6.1.4 The same Rudaw article added

‘There are about 1,500 Kurdish asylum seekers in Van, some of whom cite political, ethnic, or cultural reasons as their impetus to leave Iran. But nearly 500 of them have converted to Christianity.

‘The majority of the people Rudaw talked to want to go to the United States or Canada, while others are hoping to go to Europe.’<sup>18</sup>

- 6.1.5 A December 2018 article by National Public Radio (NPR) reported on a rise in the number of Iranians converting to evangelical Christianity in Turkey<sup>19</sup>.

- 6.1.6 The author of a January 2019 article in the Journal of Eurasian Studies stated

‘After more than 10 years of interval, I revisited the churches and the community in Istanbul again in 2016. It seems that within the years, the number of people especially in the Pentecostal Church in Istanbul increased tremendously. A former Iranian refugee resettled in the United States from Turkey returned to Istanbul with his family and is now leading the community. On a typical Sunday afternoon mass, there are now more than 70–80 people compared with an average of 25–30 people earlier.’<sup>20</sup>

- 6.1.7 And that ‘In Turkey, there are no reliable statistics for converted cases. Iranian converts usually get together at different churches for Sunday sermons and community-building. These are Pentecostal Church of the Iranians, the Union Church, the Anglican Church in Istanbul, the Protestant Church in Ankara, and a house-church in Van and Denizli.’<sup>21</sup>

- 6.1.8 A October 2018 article by Advancing Native Missions (ANM) reported on a number of Iranians converting to Christianity while in Serbia<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> DIS, DRC and Landinfo, FFM Report, February 2013, [url](#)

<sup>17</sup> Rudaw, ‘Christian converts leave Iran for Turkey, claiming persecution’, 14 August 2017, [url](#)

<sup>18</sup> Rudaw, ‘Christian converts leave Iran for Turkey, claiming persecution’, 14 August 2017, [url](#)

<sup>19</sup> NPR, 14 December 2018, [url](#)

<sup>20</sup> S.K Akcapar, ‘Religious conversions in forced migration’, 10 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>21</sup> S.K Akcapar, ‘Religious conversions in forced migration’, 10 January 2019, [url](#)

<sup>22</sup> ANM, ‘Iranians become Christian in Serbia, 18 October 2018, [url](#)

6.1.9 World Watch Monitor noted in July 2017 that:

‘Thousands of Iranian asylum-seekers across Europe are turning to Christianity, though observers are not convinced that all claims of conversion are genuine. A BBC documentary, ‘Praying for Asylum’, tells the story of a number of Iranian asylum-seekers in the Netherlands who say they have become Christians and would be exposed to persecution if they were deported.

‘Iranian-born church leader Masoud Mohammad Amin, who founded Cyrus Church, one of largest Iranian churches in Europe, said he had baptized thousands of Iranians, from the streets of Paris to Turkey. [...] He said the church, in the Dutch city of Harderwijk, has been so successful that “8,000 people in the Netherlands and 8,000 people outside the country have been baptized”.

‘However, a Dutch pastor interviewed, Gijs van den Brink, who baptizes around 25 people a year, said he had been approached by some people whose motives he doubted. He said that if someone asks to be baptized on his first visit to his church, which is east of Utrecht, “then I know enough; I know that he has a case and that he is searching for baptism ... and I explain [to] him that it will not help him ... because our government is not mad: they can easily come to know if you are a real believer or not... We’re not a group who is helping refugees to get asylum here.”<sup>23</sup>

6.1.10 Fox News reported in March 2017 that:

‘Christianity is making a comeback in Europe – and it’s mostly thanks to Muslims, say experts in Islam and faith leaders.

‘A soaring number of Muslims, many of them refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, are converting to Christianity, breathing new life into Europe’s once floundering Christian churches. The Muslims are flocking to various Christian denominations, experts said, including becoming Protestants, evangelical or Catholic.

‘As many parts of Europe are becoming more secular and houses of worship are seeing congregants leave in droves, it is Muslim converts who are reviving struggling Christian churches.’<sup>24</sup>

6.1.11 The Independent reported in December 2016 that:

‘More and more refugees are converting from Islam to Christianity as they settle in Germany, churches have said. [...] Some of the new converts were first introduced to Christianity in Germany or en route to Europe, while others had previously attempted to follow the religion in countries like Iran, where the faith is restricted or persecuted.

‘There is concern that some conversions could be motivated by the belief that it will increase the chance of being granted asylum in Germany, where Christianity is the dominant religion.’<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> World Watch Monitor ‘Thousands’ of Iranians claiming asylum in Europe’ 19 July 2017, [url](#)

<sup>24</sup> Fox News, ‘Muslim converts breathe new life into Europe’s Christian churches’, 21 March 2017, [url](#)

<sup>25</sup> The Independent, ‘Muslim refugees are converting to Christianity in Germany’, December 2016, [url](#)



## 7. House churches

### 7.1 Rise of the house church

- 7.1.1 In February 2018, the Danish Immigration Service and the Danish Refugee Council released a joint report ('the February 2018 joint DIS-DRC report') based on interviews conducted in September and October 2017 in Iran, Turkey and the United Kingdom. Within that report they explained how 'One source noted that house churches are quite common in Iran and their numbers are growing.'<sup>26</sup>
- 7.1.2 An October 2018 Christian Post article noted that 'Iranian Christians are witnessing one of the "fastest growing underground church movements"'<sup>27</sup>
- 7.1.3 The February 2018 joint DIS-DRC report also reported that 'According to the source, the increasing number of house churches show that they have space to operate, even though they are illegal.'<sup>28</sup>
- 7.1.4 The ACCORD query response on 'Iran: House churches; situation of practising Christians; treatment by authorities of Christian converts family members' dated March 2017 quoted an email response from a representative of Elam Ministries and provided the following comments on the structure of house churches in Iran:

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

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

'However, the pressure and persecution on house churches in Iran means there are an increasing number of isolated Christians in Iran: Christians who do not have regular contact with other Christians. In most cases, these isolated Christians mostly receive their teaching via Christian TV programmes, which they can access by satellite. They may also receive teaching and encouragement and a form of fellowship via the internet.'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> DIS-DRC, 'Joint Report', February 2018, [url](#)

<sup>27</sup> Christian Post, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

<sup>28</sup> DIS-DRC, 'Joint Report', February 2018, [url](#)

<sup>29</sup> ACCORD, 'Iran: Query Response', 14 June 2017, [url](#)

## 7.2 Response to the rise of house churches

### 7.2.1 Landinfo, in their November 2017 report, considered that

‘The reason why Iranian authorities define the organised house church movement to be a threat against national security, is that they relate the movement’s activities to political opposition activities. House church meetings are conducted in secret, which means that the government can neither control who participates nor what happens in the meetings. The government therefore consider the meetings to be a potential source of opposition activity that can threaten the regime. Furthermore, there is contact between many house churches and foreign communities. This kind of Western connection is perceived by the authorities as suspect, and as a threat to the regime.’<sup>30</sup>

### 7.2.2 The February 2018 joint DIS-DRC report reported that ‘The authorities fear the expansion of the house churches phenomenon in Iran.’<sup>31</sup>

### 7.2.3 The June 2018 DFAT Country Information Report on Iran also recorded “Authorities have interpreted the growth in house churches as a threat to national security: official reports and the media have characterised house churches as ‘illegal networks’ and ‘Zionist propaganda institutions’.”<sup>32</sup>

See also: [Application of the law in practice](#).

## 7.3 Monitoring of house churches

### 7.3.1 The February 2018 joint DIS-DRC report also reported that

‘The authorities use informers to infiltrate the house churches. The infiltrators are identified and selected by the authorities. To prevent infiltration and intervention, house churches organise themselves as a mobile group consisting of a small number of people. A source mentioned that the prevention of external infiltration is difficult, as the authorities use informers who pretend to be converts. One source explained that it would be a strategy for the authorities to either monitor or arrest and release members of a house church to make an informant out of them. The authorities could use information on the person’s background to put pressure on them.

‘House churches are monitored by the authorities. If the authorities receive a report about a specific house church, a monitoring process will be initiated, one source noted. However, the authorities will not act immediately, as the authorities want to collect information about both the members and who is doing what in the community. Flourishing house churches are more in danger, as the authorities see these churches as a bigger threat. Whether the authorities will intervene depends on the activities of the house church and the size of the group. A source said that the house churches are systematically raided.’<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Landinfo, ‘Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)’, 27 November 2017, [url](#)

<sup>31</sup> DIS-DRC, ‘Joint Report’, February 2018, [url](#)

<sup>32</sup> DFAT, Country Information Report on Iran, 7 June 2018, [url](#)

<sup>33</sup> DIS-DRC, ‘Joint Report’, February 2018, [url](#)



### 7.3.2 And also:

‘One source pointed out that there has been a change in the authorities monitoring of social media and online activities. Another source added that there is a widespread monitoring of telecommunication and electronic communication if a Christian has caught the interest of the authorities. Certain keywords serve as base for the electronic surveillance e.g. “church”, “Jesus”, “Christian” and “baptism”. As it is wellknown that the authorities are tapping phones, the house members are cautious and turn off their phones long before they reach their meeting place.’<sup>34</sup>

### 7.3.3 A March 2019 US Congressional Research Service report on Iran stated ‘The IRGC [The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] scrutinizes churches and Christian religious practice’<sup>35</sup>

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Section 8 updated: 09 April 2019

## 8. Application of the law in practice

### 8.1 Practicing Christianity

#### 8.1.1 The DFAT Country Information Report on Iran dated 7 June 2018 states:

‘None of the three recognised minority religions proselytises or accepts converts as members. Strict instructions not to minister to Iranians apply to the small number of Latin Catholic and Protestant churches in Tehran and elsewhere that cater to expatriates. The prohibition is enforced through bans on the use of Farsi in services; bans on Iranians attending non-Muslim religious facilities, including for non-religious events such as musical performances; and the regular contacting of churches by telephone by false potential converts in order to test the reactions of church officials to receiving such enquiries. Security officials reportedly monitor registered congregation centres to verify that services are not conducted in Farsi, and perform identity checks on worshippers to confirm that non-Christians or converts do not participate in services. Authorities have closed several churches in recent years for failing to comply with these restrictions, including churches that had existed prior to 1979.’<sup>36</sup>

#### 8.1.2 The US State Department’s Religious Freedom Report for 2018, covering events in 2017 (‘the 2017 USSD IRF report’) noted that ‘The government [...] regulated Christian religious practices closely to enforce a prohibition on proselytizing and conversion.’<sup>37</sup>

#### 8.1.3 The Australian Institute of International Affairs published an Iran Study Tour Report in April 2018 which stated

‘Under the current Islamic regime, citizens are, at least in theory, free to practice the religion of their choice. Each religious minority is guaranteed a seat in parliament, as stipulated in Iran’s constitution. However, whilst

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<sup>34</sup> DIS-DRC, ‘Joint Report’, February 2018, [url](#)

<sup>35</sup> US CRS, ‘Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options’, 6 March 2019, [url](#).

<sup>36</sup> DFAT, Country Information Report on Iran, 7 June 2018, [url](#)

<sup>37</sup> USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2017’, 29 May 2018, [url](#)

conversion to Islam is accepted and encouraged, it is illegal to convert to a different religion once one has identified as Muslim. This is considered apostasy and harsh penalties can apply. Apostasy is punishable by death in certain cases, however the crime has never been codified in law.<sup>38</sup>

See also: [Prosecution of Christians](#)

- 8.1.4 A March 2019 US Congressional Research Service report on Iran stated that ‘Christians—along with the other two protected minorities, Zoroastrians and Jews—cannot publicly practice or advocate for their religion.’<sup>39</sup>

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## 8.2 Arrest and detention of Christians

- 8.2.1 An October 2018 Christian Post article claimed that Christians were ‘under intense persecution’ and cited Christian Solidarity Worldwide<sup>40</sup> to point to three examples of prison sentences being issued to Christians<sup>41</sup>.
- 8.2.2 Freedom House stated in their report entitled ‘Freedom in the World 2019’ that ‘[t]here is an ongoing crackdown on Christian converts; in the past several years, a number of informal house churches have been raided and their pastors or congregants detained.’<sup>42</sup>
- 8.2.3 A December 2018 article written by The Telegraph stated the following:  
‘Iran has arrested more than 100 Christians in the last week, charities report, amid a growing crackdown by the Islamic Republic.  
‘Many of the 114 detained were converts to Christianity from a Muslim background, accused of “proselytising”.  
‘They had to report the history of their Christian activities and were told to cut contact with any Christian groups, according to Open Doors UK, a charity which speaks out on persecution against Christians.’<sup>43</sup>
- 8.2.4 The joint report by Article 18, Middle East Concern, CSW and Open Doors International (published in January 2019) quoted a figure from Mohabat News saying that 114 Christians were arrested in a single week in December<sup>44</sup>. However, the first mention of the figure of 114 appears to be a World Watch Monitor news story dated 5 December 2018 which suggests the source of the figure is Article 18<sup>45</sup>.
- 8.2.5 Assuming the figure is accurate, CPIT could find no further specific details about those who were arrested. Furthermore, CPIT could find no evidence to suggest that a similar number of Christians were arrested during any other month in 2018.

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<sup>38</sup> AIIA, ‘Study Tour Report’, April 2018, [url](#)

<sup>39</sup> US CRS, ‘Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options’, 6 March 2019, [url](#).

<sup>40</sup> CSW, 2 October 2018, [url](#)

<sup>41</sup> Christian Post, 16 October 2018, [url](#)

<sup>42</sup> Freedom House, ‘Freedom in the World 2019’, 4 February 2019, [url](#)

<sup>43</sup> The Telegraph, ‘Iran arrests more than 100 Christians’, 10 December 2018, [url](#)

<sup>44</sup> Article 18/MEC/CSW/Open Doors, ‘Joint Report’ (p3-4), Jan 2019, [url](#)

<sup>45</sup> World Watch Monitor, “staggering” number of Christians arrested – 114 in a week’, 5 Dec 2018, [url](#)

- 8.2.6 The Article 18, Middle East Concern, CSW and Open Doors International joint report quotes the figure, but itself only mentions 15 specific arrests in December<sup>46</sup>.
- 8.2.7 The World Watch Monitor news story stated they had been accused of proselytising but the report also states that most were allowed to go home after a few hours<sup>47</sup>. In addition, an article published by Mohabat News on 13 December 2018 entitled ‘Over 100 Iranian Christians arrested by intelligence officials’ stated that ‘Mr Borji [the advocacy director of religious freedom charity Article 18] said most of those arrested were allowed to go home after a few hours or days “as they had arrested so many of them and didn’t know what to do with them all” but that those suspected to be leaders remain in detention.’<sup>48</sup>
- 8.2.8 The December 2018 Telegraph article continued ‘It has become increasingly common for authorities to arrest worshippers, raid house churches, and confiscate Bibles.’<sup>49</sup>
- 8.2.9 The Daily Telegraph’s December 2018 article also quoted Zoe Smith, head of advocacy at Open Doors, as having said that
- “... as the number of converts to Christianity increase, so the authorities place greater restrictions on churches.
- “The restrictions are worse for churches seen to be attended by Christians who have converted from Islam. Not only that, but the government is asking unreasonably high bail amounts and seeing longer prison terms for Christians.”
- ‘[...] “Church leaders are put under pressure to leave the country or face an arrest,”’<sup>50</sup>
- 8.2.10 The February 2018 joint DIS-DRC report stated:
- ‘The authorities are primarily targeting the house church leaders and secondary the members and converts. Two other sources stated that the authorities target both the leaders of the house churches and the members.
- ‘The typical pattern of targeting is by arresting and releasing the house church leaders, as the authorities want to weaken the house church. Ordinary members of house churches also risk arrest in a house church. However, they will be released again on the condition that they stay away from proselytizing. If they stop proselytizing, the authorities will stop gathering information about them, a source added. One source mentioned that it would be possible for an arrested convert to pay his/her way out of an arrest. The source added that even if it is known that the person is a converted Muslim, it would be a question of the amount of money paid to be released. Whether a house church member is targeted also depends on his/her conducted activities and if he/she is known abroad, the same source noted. Ordinary house church members risk being called in for interrogation

<sup>46</sup> World Watch Monitor, ‘“staggering’ number of Christians arrested – 114 in a week’, 5 Dec 2018, [url](#)

<sup>47</sup> World Watch Monitor, ‘“staggering’ number of Christians arrested – 114 in a week’, 5 Dec 2018, [url](#)

<sup>48</sup> Mohabat News, ‘Over 100 Iranian Christians arrested by intelligence officials’, 13 Dec 2018, [url](#)

<sup>49</sup> The Telegraph, ‘Iran arrests more than 100 Christians’, 10 December 2018, [url](#)

<sup>50</sup> The Telegraph, ‘Iran arrests more than 100 Christians’, 10 December 2018, [url](#)

on a regular basis as the authorities want to harass and intimidate them, a source explained.

'If a house church member is arrested for the first time, he/she will normally be released within 24 hours. If he/she has been detained in prison, he/she will receive his charge within 24 hours and come to court within ten days, a source mentioned.'<sup>51</sup>

8.2.11 Open Doors USA claimed that 'Leaders of groups of Christian converts have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison sentences for "crimes against the national security."' and the same report gave no specific information on numbers, but said that 'many' Christians had been prosecuted and either sentenced to imprisonment or were awaiting trial<sup>52</sup>.

8.2.12 In their November 2017 report, Landinfo (the Norwegian COI Unit) cited Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF 2017) as having '...published the "Freedom of Religion or Belief & Blasphemy Prisoners Database", which lists people imprisoned for their faith in a number of countries. Under the Iran chapter, which was updated 18 September 2017, 16 Christian prisoners are listed, of which 12 are Iranian citizens.'<sup>53</sup> As of 6 December 2018, HRWF's database listed 22 Christian prisoners, of which 19 are Iranian citizens<sup>54</sup>.

8.2.13 The USSD IRF report for 2017 stated that:

'Christians, particularly evangelicals and converts from Islam, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and detention, and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to Christian NGO reports. Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year's end on charges related to their religious beliefs. Prison authorities reportedly continued to withhold medical care from prisoners, including some Christians, according to human rights groups. According to human rights NGOs, the government also continued to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing.'<sup>55</sup>

8.2.14 The same report also went on to state:

'Christian World Watch Monitor reported on the arrest or imprisonment of at least 193 Christians for their religious affiliation or activities in 2016. Authorities continued to arrest members of unrecognized churches for operating illegally in private homes or on charges of supporting and accepting assistance from "enemy" countries. Many arrests reportedly took place during police raids on religious gatherings and included confiscations of religious property. News reports stated that Christians who were arrested were subject to severe physical and psychological mistreatment by authorities, which at times included beatings and solitary confinement.'<sup>56</sup>

8.2.15 The DFAT Country Information Report on Iran dated 7 June 2018 stated:

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<sup>51</sup> DIS-DRC, 'Joint Report', February 2018, [url](#)

<sup>52</sup> Open Doors USA, World Watch List, u/d, [url](#)

<sup>53</sup> Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)', 27 November 2017, [url](#)

<sup>54</sup> HRWF, 'Database', updated 6 December 2018, [url](#)

<sup>55</sup> USSD, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2017', 29 May 2018, [url](#)

<sup>56</sup> USSD, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2017', 29 May 2018, [url](#)

'The judiciary has handed down long sentences in relation to house church activities: in July 2017, the Revolutionary Court convicted eight Christians of 'acting against national security through the establishment of a house church' and 'insulting Islamic sanctities' and sentenced the group to between ten and 15 years' imprisonment. According to international observers, as of December 2016 approximately 90 Christians were in detention or awaiting trial because of their religious beliefs and activities.'<sup>57</sup>

- 8.2.16 A joint report by Article18; Middle East Concern; CSW and Open Doors International, released in January 2019 (covering events in 2018) contained a table which they claim 'includes cases which have appeared in public records, and does not constitute a comprehensive record of every Christian currently detained in Iran'<sup>58</sup> of 22 persons detained (plus 7 others whose names have not been publicized<sup>59</sup>), the first of which was in 2013; the most recent in December 2018. Of the 22 listed, 10 had been sentenced to a period of imprisonment, 1 of which had been released and another released on bail; a further 6 had been released (4 of which on bail)<sup>60</sup>.
- 8.2.17 A March 2019 US Congressional Research Service report on Iran stated that 'numerous Christians remain incarcerated for actions related to religious practice, including using wine in certain services'<sup>61</sup>

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### 8.3 Prosecution of Christians

- 8.3.1 A Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran dated 17 March 2017 reported they were 'concerned about the targeting and harsh treatment of Christians from Muslim backgrounds and members of various Sufi groups, including the Nematollahi Gonabadi order and the Yarsan (also known Ahl-e Haqq), which are considered "deviant faiths" by the authorities and some members of the clerical establishment. These groups continue to face arbitrary arrest, harassment and detention, and are often accused of national security crimes such as "acting against national security" or "propaganda against the State". Under Iranian law, individuals, including Christians of Muslim backgrounds, can be prosecuted for apostasy, although it is not specifically codified as a crime in the Islamic Penal Code.'<sup>62</sup>
- 8.3.2 The annual report produced by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in April 2018 stated: 'Evangelical Christians and Christian converts, however, are particularly targeted for repression because many conduct services in Persian and proselytize to those outside their community. Pastors of house churches are commonly charged with unfounded national security-related crimes, as well as apostasy and illegal house-church activities.'

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<sup>57</sup> DFAT, Country Information Report on Iran, 7 June 2018, [url](#)

<sup>58</sup> Article 18/MEC/CSW/Open Doors, Joint Report (p7), Jan 2019, [url](#)

<sup>59</sup> Article 18/MEC/CSW/Open Doors, Joint Report (p7, footnote 31), Jan 2019, [url](#)

<sup>60</sup> Article 18/MEC/CSW/Open Doors, Joint Report (p7), Jan 2019, [url](#)

<sup>61</sup> US CRS, 'Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options', 6 March 2019, [url](#).

<sup>62</sup> Special Rapporteur on [...] human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 'Report', 17 March 2017, [url](#)



'While Iranian authorities have for decades raided house church services and arrested hundreds of worshipers and church leaders, the severity of sentencing has increased in recent years. In May 2017, four evangelical Christians, three of them Azerbaijani citizens, were sentenced to 10 years in prison each for house church activities and evangelism. The following month, Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, who previously served a prison sentence for apostasy and is among those highlighted by USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, faced trial along with three codefendants because of their house church activities. Each of the four Christians was sentenced to 10 years in prison, with Nadarkhani receiving an additional two years in exile.'<sup>63</sup>

- 8.3.3 Article 18, in an interview with the UK Home Office in July 2017, stated that apostasy charges are rarely stated on court documents although individuals are verbally charged, questioned, intimidated and threatened with apostasy<sup>64</sup>.
- 8.3.4 Open Doors, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 8 August 2017 stated that almost all those who are arrested are arrested for actions against 'national security', which is very broad. These arrests are unlawful. 'National security' is the reason given for arrests; people are not arrested for apostasy. Although apostasy is punishable by death in Iran, the Islamic Republic has never codified the crime of apostasy. Instead, relying on the Iranian Constitution, the Islamic Penal Code authorises the enforcement of certain Islamic laws known as *hodud* crimes even when the crime is not specifically mentioned in the criminal code<sup>65</sup>.
- 8.3.5 In their November 2017 report, Landinfo (the Norwegian COI Unit) – based on a range of sources – concluded:
- 'Although it is not uncommon for arrested converts to be threatened with possible apostasy charges (Landinfo 2017, p. 11), it is very rare that it has actually happened. This is shown by the practise of Iranian prosecuting authorities and courts. In the history of Islamic Republic (from 1979 up to today), only on very rare occasions have Christian converts been charged with apostasy (IHRDC 2014b, p. 15, 29-35; ICHRI 2013a, p. 31-32). It is also rare that converts have been convicted of blasphemy (ICHRI 2013a, p. 10; more about this in Landinfo 2017, p. 12). Organised Christian activity and contact with Christian organisations abroad is instead defined as political activity and as a threat against the country's Islamic identity and national security (Open Doors USA 2017b; World Watch Monitor 2016). Consequently, it is the intelligence services that monitor, arrest and interrogate converts, and prosecutions are held before the Revolutionary Court (ICHRI 2013a, p. 49).'<sup>66</sup>
- 8.3.6 The Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Country Information Report on Iran dated 7 June 2018, which is

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<sup>63</sup> USCIRF, '2018 Annual Report', April 2018, [url](#)

<sup>64</sup> UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18, 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

<sup>65</sup> UK Home Office, 'Interview with Open Doors, 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

<sup>66</sup> Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)', 27 Nov 2017, [url](#)

based on a range of sources, information from their Embassies in country and visits to the country concerned, reported

‘While apostasy and blasphemy cases are no longer an everyday occurrence in Iran, authorities continue to use religiously-based charges (such as ‘insulting Islam’) against a diverse group of individuals. In recent years, the group has included Shi’a members of the reform movement, Muslim-born converts to Christianity, Baha’i, Muslims who challenge the prevailing interpretation of Islam (particularly Sufis), and others who espouse unconventional religious beliefs (including members of recognised religious groups).

‘Some religiously-based cases have clear political overtones, while other cases do seem to be primarily of a religious nature, particularly when connected to proselytisation.’<sup>67</sup>

8.3.7 Landinfo, in their November 2017 report, explained the underlying rationale:

‘In general, the government regards religious pluralism beyond their control as a security risk (Khalaji 2013). Iran does not have freedom of association, and all organised activity, whether political, religious or cultural, must be applied for and authorised by the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Elam Ministries, email 2017; ICHRI 2013b, p. 32). Activities that are considered to undermine or threaten the legitimacy and stability of the Islamic regime are not allowed and may have criminal consequences. The regime bases its legitimacy on Islam being the religion of the people, and that the government exercises the will of the people through an Islamic regime. Any religious movement that differs from or provides an alternative to orthodox Shiite Islam is interpreted as a threat to the state itself. Religious activists are therefore viewed with suspicion and risk being prosecuted.’<sup>68</sup>

8.3.8 The February 2018 joint DIS-DRC report explained how ‘Christian converts are typically not charged with apostasy; convert cases are usually considered as national security matters which are handled by the Revolutionary Court. A source added that the authorities perceive activities related to conversion as political activities.’<sup>69</sup>

8.3.9 A March 2019 US Congressional Research Service report on Iran stated that there have been ‘prosecutions of Christians for converting from Islam’ but give no detail on numbers or reasons behind these<sup>70</sup>.

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## 8.4 Other incidents

8.4.1 The US State Department’s Religious Freedom Report for 2018, covering events in 2017 (‘the 2017 USSD IRF report’) noted that ‘The government continued to harass, interrogate [...] Christians (particularly converts).’<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> DFAT, Country Information Report on Iran, 7 June 2018, [url](#)

<sup>68</sup> Landinfo, ‘Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)’, 27 Nov 2017, [url](#)

<sup>69</sup> DIS-DRC, ‘Joint Report’, Feb 2018, [url](#)

<sup>70</sup> US CRS, ‘Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options’, 6 March 2019, [url](#).

<sup>71</sup> USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2017’, 29 May 2018, [url](#)

#### 8.4.2 The same report also went on to state:

‘According to human rights organizations, Christian advocacy groups, and NGOs, the government continued to regulate Christian religious practices. Official reports and the media continued to characterize Christian house churches as “illegal networks” and “Zionist propaganda institutions.”

Christian community leaders stated that if the authorities found Armenian or Assyrian churches were baptizing new converts or preaching in Farsi, they closed the churches. Authorities also reportedly barred unregistered or unrecognized Christians from entering church premises, closed churches that allowed them to enter, and arrested Christian converts.

‘Christian advocacy groups stated the government, through pressure and church closures, had eliminated all but a handful of Farsi-language church services, thus restricting services almost entirely to the Armenian and Assyrian languages. Security officials monitored registered congregation centers to perform identity checks on worshippers to confirm non-Christians or converts did not participate in services. In response, many citizens who had converted to Protestantism or other Christian faiths reportedly practiced their religion in secret. Other unrecognized religious minorities such as Bahais and Yarsanis were also forced to gather in private homes to practice their faith in secret.’<sup>72</sup>

#### 8.4.3 A March 2019 US Congressional Research Service report on Iran stated that ‘At times, there have been unexplained assassinations of pastors in Iran.’<sup>73</sup>

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### 8.5 Activities which could attract attention from the authorities

8.5.1 Landinfo’s November 2017 report, referring to Elam Ministries’ conversation with the Danish Immigration Service, noted “Elam Ministries has also pointed out that the authorities’ priorities appear to be a matter of resources. The authorities apparently do not use their resources on new believers, because their priority is stopping the establishment of new house churches. Therefore, they are most interested in striking at the leaders of house churches and networks, according to Elam (as quoted in DIS 2014, p. 27).”<sup>74</sup>

8.5.2 Article 18, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 12 July 2017, stated that people in Turkey have said that, they have been told by Iranian interrogators that they don’t have a problem if a person confines their beliefs to themselves and pray and believe whatever they wish to believe privately. But the moment they appear to be speaking to others about Christianity, or express their beliefs in the form of worship with others [publicly, like in a house church] “then we have a problem”<sup>75</sup>

8.5.3 In August 2017, when asked by the UK Home Office what attracts the authorities to new converts and what kind of activities could therefore lead to ill-treatment, Open Doors and Article 18 suggested the following would, although these can depend on the city:

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<sup>72</sup> USSD, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2017’, 29 May 2018, [url](#)

<sup>73</sup> US CRS, ‘Iran: Internal Politics and U.S. Policy and Options’, 6 March 2019, [url](#).

<sup>74</sup> Landinfo, ‘Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)’, 27 Nov 2017, [url](#)

<sup>75</sup> Article 18, ‘Interview with CPIT, UK Home Office’, 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.



- Any kind of gathering
- Sharing the gospel
- Being in possession of more than one Bible (usually one Bible will be tolerated by the authorities, but not always)
- Possession of a library of Christian literature
- Holding discipleship classes
- Studying theology
- Contact with Christian organisations
- Attending Christian conferences and seminars inside the country or abroad where teaching takes place
- Hosting or, in some cases, even attending house churches<sup>76,77</sup>.

8.5.4 The Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Country Information Report on Iran dated 7 June 2018, which is based on a range of sources, information from their Embassies in country and visits to the country concerned, reported 'International observers advise that Iranians who convert to Christianity outside the country are unlikely to face adverse attention from authorities upon return to Iran, provided they have not previously come to the attention of authorities for political activities conducted in Iran, maintain a low profile and do not engage in proselytisation or political activities within the country.'<sup>78</sup>

8.5.5 DFAT also concluded that

'...small, self-contained house church congregations that maintain a low profile and do not seek to recruit new members are unlikely to attract adverse attention from authorities beyond monitoring and, possibly, low-level harassment. Members of larger congregations that do engage in proselytisation and have connections to broader house church networks are more likely to face official repercussions, which may include arrest and prosecution. The leaders of such congregations are at particular risk in this regard.'<sup>79</sup>

8.5.6 The February 2018 joint DIS-DRC report, based on interviews conducted in Iran, Turkey and the United Kingdom between September and October 2017, stated that:

'If a converted person uses the religion politically to for instance compare disadvantages of Islam with advantages of Christianity or another religion on social media, it could be a problem for him, a source mentioned. Most Iranians are not very religious, but they might see conversion as a way to come closer to Western values, and as a protest against the system, another source mentioned. However, it was underlined that it would apply to a

<sup>76</sup> Open Doors, 'Interview with CPIT, UK Home Office', 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

<sup>77</sup> Article 18, 'Interview with CPIT, UK Home Office', 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

<sup>78</sup> DFAT, Country Information Report on Iran, 7 June 2018, [url](#)

<sup>79</sup> DFAT, Country Information Report on Iran, 7 June 2018, [url](#)

person who has made his/her own analysis of the two religions and not someone who has used “copy paste” phrases.’<sup>80</sup>

- 8.5.7 The Australian Institute of International Affairs published an Iran Study Tour Report in April 2018 which stated ‘It appears that there is a high (unofficial) rate of conversion to Christianity, placing it amongst the highest conversion rates in the world. Whilst those who promote Christianity in public are persecuted, those who practise Christianity privately are largely left to their own devices.’<sup>81</sup>

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Section 9 updated: 16 April 2019

## 9. Impact on others

### 9.1 Treatment of family members

- 9.1.1 The ACCORD query response dated March 2017 quoted an email response from a representative of Elam Ministries and provided the following comments with regard to the treatment of family members of Christian converts by state authorities:

‘We can certainly confirm that family members of Christians (especially Christian converts) are not spared suffering. For example, in one case of a house raid and arrest of a Christian couple perpetrated by Iran's Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) in July 2014, the 12-year old son of the couple was at home during the house raid. He was hit by the officers while being questioned about his own faith. He was also arrested along with his parents. Further, we have heard examples of elderly parents being harassed regarding their child's conversion to Christianity.’<sup>82</sup>

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

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

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<sup>80</sup> DIS-DRC, ‘Joint Report’, Feb 2018, [url](#)

<sup>81</sup> AIIA, ‘Study Tour Report’, April 2018, [url](#)

<sup>82</sup> ACCORD, ‘Iran: Query Response’, 14 June 2017, [url](#)

are always preferred to receive the inheritance. There are many other ways that family members suffer because of the conversion of an individual.” (Elam Ministries, 28 March 2017).<sup>83</sup>

- 9.1.3 Open Doors, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 8 August 2017, stated that it’s often reported by the Christians who have fled the country that their families are targets of harassment to force them to cut their continuing connection with house church members and active Christians inside Iran<sup>84</sup>.

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Section 10 updated: 16 April 2019

## 10. Treatment of returning Christians to Iran

### 10.1 Profile, activities and social media

- 10.1.1 The February 2018 joint DIS-DRC report, based on interviews conducted in Iran, Turkey and the United Kingdom between September and October 2017, stated that:

‘Several sources addressed the issue regarding Iranian converts returning from Europe. According to two sources, converted returnees who do not carry out activities related to Christianity upon return will not be of interest to the authorities. Middle East Concern made the distinction whether the converted person was known before leaving Iran or not; returning will cause problems if the convert has been known by the authorities before leaving. If the opposite is the case, going back to Iran would not be problematic. Converts who announce their conversion in public may face serious problems.

‘If the returned convert has been very outspoken about his/her conversion on social media, including Facebook, the authorities might become aware of it and arrest and interrogate the convert upon return. A Western embassy said that the subsequent process would depend on what the returnees inform the authorities about. The embassy did not consider that the converts would receive harsh punishment if they are not high-profiled and are not involved in propagating Christianity or activities perceived as a threat to national security.

‘Declaring conversion on Facebook in itself does not lead to persecution but likely to monitoring. One source explained that a photo indicating a conversion posted on the internet would be evaluated by the authorities along with the profile and activities of the converted person. If the person did not have any previous affiliation with Christianity before leaving the country, he/she will not be persecuted.’<sup>85</sup>

- 10.1.2 A Danish Immigration Service update on the situation for Christian converts in Iran, June 2014, citing various sources stated that:

‘With regard to the situation of converts who return to Iran after being baptized abroad, be it in Turkey, Armenia, UAE or another country, the source found that they may return to Iran quietly and not encounter any

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<sup>83</sup> ACCORD, ‘Iran: Query Response’, 14 June 2017, [url](#)

<sup>84</sup> Open Doors, ‘Interview with CPIT, UK Home Office’, 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

<sup>85</sup> DIS-DRC, ‘Joint Report’, February 2018, [url](#)

problems. If the person is already monitored by the authorities, he or she could risk consequences upon return to Iran.

'According to AIIS [Amnesty International's International Secretariat] it is difficult to obtain information on potential risks an individual may face upon returning to Iran after conversion abroad. If Iranian informants have gathered information regarding an individual who has returned to Iran, the authorities may arrest them for questioning. It is possible that charging and conviction will ensue the arrest and questioning. A wide group of people could be in that position: students, political activists, family members of political persons might even be questioned as well as Christian converts.

'Regarding whether baptism abroad would put a person at risk from the authorities in Iran, AIIS considered that the importance of baptism should be balanced against how the Iranian authorities perceive a convert. A person who has attended trainings and sessions abroad may be considered a convert, although he or she may not have officially been baptized.

'Asked about the situation for a convert who returns to Iran after having converted abroad, i.e. in Europe or a Western country, Mansour Borji [Advocacy Officer for Article 18] found that there would be no difference in the way the Iranian authorities would deal with the case. If the person is known to the authorities and they have shown an interest in him or her before he or she left the country, there could be a risk to him or her upon returning. If the person is unknown to the authorities, the source did not consider that there would be a huge threat towards him or her. The source referred to a case of a family who went back to Iran and upon return, they were threatened and followed around/harassed. It was considered that perhaps relatives or others had reported them to the authorities causing the harassment. Ultimately, the family left Iran again. They had secretly begun to attend a house church.

'Concerning the consequences for an individual upon return to Iran after having converted abroad, CSW [Christian Solidarity Worldwide] said that any convert who wishes to practice his or her faith upon return, would face serious risk.

'When asked about the consequences of returning to Iran after having been baptized abroad, Elam Ministries said that many Iranians do go abroad and return to Iran after a while. If the authorities in Iran become aware of the fact that a person has been baptized abroad such an individual may risk interrogation and repercussions. The source considered that the authorities may find out that an individual has been baptized through informers and telephone/internet tapping.

'It was considered that persons who return from Western countries after converting would have to be very careful about doing any evangelizing. When considering the situation of an individual who has converted in Europe who then returns to Iran, their situation would be much the same as that of Iranians who convert in Iran. Such individuals would have to lay low and not speak openly about their conversion. If their conversion is uncovered and the authorities are notified, there is a risk that such an individual will be

suspected of links with foreign organizations much the same as a convert who has been living in Iran.

'The source added that those who are outside of Iran for extended periods of time may be more at risk in that the authorities may suspect them of spying. It was further added that this counts not only for Christian converts but also for other Iranians.

'Asked about the situation of Christian converts who return to Iran after coming to Turkey or another country, and meeting with other believers, the representatives of the Union Church informed the delegation that if the converts stay "quiet"; i.e., they do not associate with other believers, they may not be discovered and the visits to a foreign country will then not make a lot of a difference for them.

'According to the representatives of the Union Church, even if not known to authorities, converts can face shunning and even "honor killing" by their families.

'If a Christian convert is not affiliated with a house church, an international organisation in Turkey said that the risk to him or her [upon return] would depend on how he or she lives his or her Christian life. If such an individual plainly prays at home and does not share his or her faith to others, there would be no risk to him or her. However, within the evangelical groups that these converts may follow, evangelizing is important and therefore if he or she starts doing this, there could be a risk of harm from the authorities.

'Elam Ministries said that if such a person who returns from abroad is not connected to a house church or network, there would be no particular threat, however as far as his or her Christian faith is concerned all aspects of his or her life will be affected because of their new faith and as a result, he or she will run into the same issues that other converts face for example with regards to school, marriage, university, employment and housing. They must be secret believers and are unable to speak of their faith to anyone else and to live an openly Christian lifestyle.'

'According to an international organisation in Turkey there are reportedly large numbers of Iranians in Turkey who are involved in informal house church movements with links to similar networks in Iran. Available information to international organizations monitoring the situation in Iran suggests that persons who come to the notice of the authorities on account of their conversion to Christianity are interrogated in relation to perceived threats to society and to the Iranian regime, such as unqualified threats to public order or insults to Islamic sanctities as understood under Iranian law.

'When asked if an international organisation in Turkey considered it would make a difference if a person had been trained or baptized in Turkey or in an European country, the source said that if it only concerns conversion, there would probably be no difference. If baptism is uncovered, it could pose problems for the individual. The person's link to a network abroad would also raise the profile. However, there are no reports of persons who have been

detained and officially charged with conversion-related offences after returning to Iran from Turkey.’<sup>86</sup>

- 10.1.3 Open Doors told the UK Home Office on 8 August 2017 that a person who converts to Christianity inside Iran is thought to be less of a threat than a person who converts outside of Iran, who is likely to be thought of as an evangelist. The regime is very suspicious of contact with the outside world. The Iranian regime would not explore the validity of a person’s conversion when they return to Iran. It would be accepted at face value. A ‘convert’ who returns to Iran (even if the conversion is not recognised as genuine in the place of conversion such as the UK) may be forced to sign a commitment to return to Islam. This is likely to involve detention and interrogation. Some people leave the country again. Treatment varies from city to city and may not always involve detention<sup>87</sup>.
- 10.1.4 Elam Ministries interviewed by the UK Home Office on 6 September 2017 stated that it was very rare for people to return to Iran. When asked the reasons why some people return they stated that those who return have families, property or businesses. Many of those who return go back as their families have had to put up large sums of money for their bail and if they don’t go back their families will have to cover the bail money. Lots of people have to give house deeds to ensure the release of family members; the defendant doesn’t want their family to lose property<sup>88</sup>.
- 10.1.5 A Finnish Immigration Service report on Christian converts in Iran, dated 21 August 2015, citing various sources stated: ‘No research data on the return of Christian converts to Iran is available, but the common perception is that they will get into trouble mainly if they try to proselytise or otherwise make their religious views public. The state’s interest is focused more on the public practice of religion and proselytising than on one’s private convictions.’<sup>89</sup>
- 10.1.6 CPIT could find no other sources that stated returnees would be forced to sign a commitment to return to Islam.

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<sup>86</sup> DIS, Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran, June 2014, [url](#)

<sup>87</sup> UK Home Office, ‘Interview with Open Doors’, 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

<sup>88</sup> UK Home Office, ‘Interview with Elam Ministries’, 6 September 2017. Copy available on request

<sup>89</sup> Finnish Immigration Service, ‘Christian Converts in Iran’, 21 August 2015, [url](#)



# Terms of Reference

A 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) is a broad outline of what the CPIN seeks to cover. They form the basis for the [country information section](#). The Home Office's Country Policy and Information Team uses some standardised ToRs, depending on the subject, and these are then adapted depending on the country concerned.

For this particular CPIN, the following topics were identified prior to drafting as relevant and on which research was undertaken:

- Religious demography (generally)
- Numbers of Christians in Iran
  - No. of “born” Christians
  - No. of converts
    - Converts **in** Iran
    - Converts **outside of** Iran
  - Trends over time
- House Churches
  - Numbers
  - Types
  - Locations
- Legal framework on religious minorities
  - Generally
  - “born” Christians
  - Christian converts
- Application of the law in practice (focus on converts in particular)
  - Treatment of Christians
  - Arrest, detention and prosecution of Christians
    - Numbers, timescale
    - Charges, trials, sentences
  - Profiles, common characteristics or commonalities (if applicable)
  - Capacity and focus of the Iranian State
- Impact on others
  - family members
  - other (fellow) church members
- Treatment of returning Christians to Iran

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# Version control

## Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

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## Changes from last version of this note

Updated COI

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