



Suuntaus project

CHRISTIAN CONVERTS IN IRAN

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INTRODUCTION

This theme report is part of the ERF-funded 'Suuntaus' project of the Country Information Service of the Finnish Immigration Service, the purpose of which is to identify major country information topics and to better anticipate future information needs. The method used is the systematic review of interview minutes, using a purpose-designed form template. The countries examined are Nigeria, Iran, Iraq and Russia; stateless persons are also examined. The theme of the present report is one of the most frequently quoted reasons for seeking asylum, according to the minutes analysed. However, the report does not include references to individual minutes; instead the data in this report are derived from public sources.

1. CHRISTIANITY IN IRAN

The Christian community in Iran is divided into Christians by birth and new converts. There are no precise statistics available on the size of the community, but it is most often estimated to number around 300,000. Estimates of the number of Christian converts in particular vary a great deal, as the state does not approve of or recognise the conversion of Muslims into a different religion.¹

Christianity is believed to be growing in Iran, and the number of converts has likely been underestimated.² The majority of recent conversions appear to be connected to the Evangelical Christian movement which emphasises the importance of proselytism.³ The general dissatisfaction of the middle class with the political Islam practised by the state has not only made Iranians receptive to Christian proselytism but has also driven them to turn increasingly to other alternatives, such as Islamic mysticism and the New Age movement.⁴

1.1. Ethnic Christians

Iran's native Christian community is very old. The majority of the Christians are ethnic Armenians, estimated to number around 200,000.⁵ In addition, there is also a very small group of Christian ethnic Assyrians and Chaldeans in the country.⁶ The Armenian and Assyrian Christians' rights to practice religion as well as their rights to education and family law according to their own traditions are guaranteed in the constitution.⁷ The communities also have their own representatives in the parliament: Assyrians and Chaldeans have one joint representative and the Armenians have two, one representing the Northern and the other the Southern Armenians.⁸ Recognised religious minorities – which include Zoroastrians and Jews in addition to the ethnic Christians – still face discrimination in their working life, education and in criminal and family law matters.⁹

Traditional Christian communities mainly follow the Orthodox or Catholic denominations and hold services in their own liturgical languages. As a rule, the communities do not co-operate with Protestant churches; they have attempted to maintain good relations with the Iranian go-

¹ Guardian 1.6.2015; ICHRI 2013 p.6; Sanasarian 2000 p.43-44

² ICHRI 2013 p.6; Landinfo 2011

³ ICHRI 2013 p.21; Small Media 2014

⁴ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013; Small Media 2014

⁵ Sanasarian 2000 p.36

⁶ *ibid.* p.40–43

⁷ Constitution of Iran 1979 Article 13

⁸ Sanasarian 2000 p.40

⁹ ICHRI 2013 p.6, 11–12

vernment. Assyrian and Armenian Christians do not accept Christian converts into their communities¹⁰, and the Assyrian and Armenian Orthodox churches do not proselytise amongst the Persian population.¹¹

There are at least 600 churches in Iran, the majority of which are old Assyrian and Armenian churches.¹² In 2009, there were 25 registered churches in the capital city, Tehran, belonging to the Armenians, Assyrians, Protestants, Adventists, Catholics and the Orthodox.¹³ Six of the churches in Tehran are Catholic, and they have not proselytised or baptised Muslims. The same goes for the Russian and Greek Orthodox churches.¹⁴

1.2. Evangelical Protestants

The majority of the converts in Iran are Evangelical Protestant Christians, who are estimated to number around 70,000.¹⁵ The Protestant churches in Iran were established as a result of proselytising by preachers from Europe and the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁶ The churches in Iran, however, have their own theological interpretation, which diverges from that of the mother churches: most of the Evangelical Christians in Iran do not accept the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁷

The largest Protestant Church with activities in Iran is the Pentecostal *Jama'at-e Rabbani (Assembly of God)*. The congregation of Tehran's main church numbers a little under one thousand, and it has also operated elsewhere in the country.¹⁸ Before the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Anglican Church had a notable position, but the Islamic Republic was very suspicious of it right from the beginning of the revolution, and the Church no longer conducts many operations in Iran.¹⁹

In Iran, the six leading Protestant Churches, three of which have proselytised amongst the Muslims, belong to the Council of Protestant Churches founded in 1986.²⁰ The total number of members of the three Evangelical Persian-language churches that operated in Tehran – the Presbyterian Emmanuel Church in Vanak, St Peter's Church in Imam Khomeini, and the Jama'ate Rabbani congregation's main church on Taleghani²¹ – was in 2006 less than one thousand.²² Outside of Tehran, Persian-language churches have operated at least in Isfahan, Shiraz, Rasht, Hamadan, Abadan, Mashhad, Ahvaz, the provinces of East and West Azerbaijan, and in Arak.²³ Lately, practically all Persian-language Protestant Churches have either been closed down by the authorities or have had to limit their operations significantly.²⁴

¹⁰ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.12-13

¹¹ DIS 2014 p.34

¹² Guardian 1.6.2015

¹³ Landinfo 2011 p.5

¹⁴ *ibid.* p.9-10

¹⁵ ICHRI 2013 p.6

¹⁶ Sanasarian 2000 p.43-44; Small Media 2014 p.51

¹⁷ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.14; Small Media 2014 p.56

¹⁸ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.23

¹⁹ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.9-10; Sanasarian 2000 p.123-124

²⁰ Landinfo 2011 p.9

²¹ ICHRI 4 Jun 2013; HR Iran 2013; IHRDC 11 Jun 2012

²² Landinfo 2011 p.11

²³ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.23; ICHRI 4 Jun 2013

²⁴ ICHRI 2013; ICHRI 4 Jun 2013

Iran's Evangelical Protestant Churches have ties to the Pentecostal movement in Europe and the United States, which has increased the state's suspicion of them.²⁵ Elam, the most influential foreign actor in Iran, is a Christian organisation operating from Great Britain and the United States that aims to spread Christianity in Iran by offering theological learning materials and other guidance to Christians in the country. Elam organises, for instance, several unofficial home churches by training their pastors.²⁶

2. RESTRICTIONS ON THE CHRISTIANS' PRACTICE OF RELIGION

Christian activities are watched closely in Iran.²⁷ Iran's native Christian minorities – the Armenians and the Assyrians – are not allowed to hold their services in Persian. In practice, all churches are monitored, and they are required to report on their activities to the authorities.²⁸ The state's interest is primarily focused on evangelising Protestant Churches and proselytising Christians. Restrictions have been placed on the religious practice and organisation of Protestant congregations, and their members have been arrested.²⁹ Christian converts may be discriminated against when they look for jobs in either the public or private sectors, or they may be laid off because of their religion. Discrimination has also been reported in obtaining a business permit, education (through interruption of studies or denial of a study place), marriage and family life, child custody, distribution of inheritances, and in court.³⁰

Proselytising is strictly forbidden, as converting from Islam to a different religion is illegal in Iran. The import and publishing of Persian-language bibles is also forbidden.³¹ Four Persian-language Christian satellite channels can be seen in Iran (Mohabat TV, Sat-7 Pars, Kelisa TV and Nejat TV), the signals of which the state attempts to jam.³² The satellite channels have been sending Persian-language Christian programming from aboard around the clock since 2003.³³ The state also attempts to block access to Christian websites intended for Iranian converts.³⁴

2.1. Actions against Persian-language Protestant Churches.

In Iran, the Ministry of Culture's (*Vezerat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Eslami*, *Vezerat-e Ershad* in short) department handling the matters of religious minorities is the body monitoring the activities and membership figures of churches.³⁵ The Ministry of Culture is responsible for the monitoring of all religious organisations: Official churches must report any new members joining their congregation, and their personal information is sent to the ministry. Authorities also check the identity of churchgoers in front of the places of worship before services.³⁶ As a result of this pressure, official churches have discontinued baptising people outside their congregations.³⁷ Since around 2006–2007, no Christian converts have been baptised in Iran.³⁸

²⁵ Small Media 2014 p.56

²⁶ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.20

²⁷ ICHRI 2013 p.57–59

²⁸ *ibid.* p.6

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.* p.63

³¹ Sanasarian 2000 p.74

³² ICHRI 2013 p.11, 60

³³ Landinfo 2011 p.11

³⁴ Small Media 2014

³⁵ Sanasarian 2000 p.74

³⁶ ICHRI 2013 p.53; DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.11

³⁷ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.13

³⁸ DIS 2014 p.15

Of the Christian community in Iran, Protestants have faced the most problems from the authorities, because their services are held in Persian, and the churches usually proselytise. In practice, all churches holding services in Persian have had to cease their activities. Even before this, those churches that were still open had to move their services from Friday to Sunday, which is a weekday in Iran, in order to reduce the number of churchgoers. Furthermore, churches have been instructed to provide lists of their members in order to avoid being closed down.³⁹ Due to the pressure on the churches, Protestant churches including Jama'at-e Rabbani, which had been proselytising very actively, stopped baptising converts and allowing them to join their activities.⁴⁰ Some of Jama'at-e Rabbani's members who ended up on the authorities' lists later lost their jobs or places of study.⁴¹

In 2010, the Iranian National Security Council decided that Persian-language services in churches had to be discontinued entirely, after which it has been very difficult for the Protestant churches to operate. The intelligence department of the Revolutionary Guard started implementing the decision at the end of 2010, and by 2013, even the largest churches were closed.⁴² The leading Pentecostal and Protestant church Jama'at-e Rabbani (*Assembly of God*) had long been the primary target of the government authorities' suspicions, and in June 2013, the restrictions placed on the church came to a head with a raid on the Tehran main church, the arrest of the pastor, and the final closing of the church.⁴³ The Presbyterian Immanuel Church in Vanak, Tehran, which gave Persian-language services, was closed in 2012⁴⁴, and the Persian-language Protestant church of the Assyrians – Church of Shahrara – was closed by the authorities as early as in 2009.⁴⁵ During church raids, several pastors have been arrested, some of whom remain imprisoned.⁴⁶

2.2. Home churches

The home church phenomenon that has spread in Iran was born as a result of the restrictions placed on official churches.⁴⁷ Today, Christian converts meet in unofficial 'home churches' (*kelisaha-ye khanegi*) in the privacy of their own homes which have not been registered with the authorities as places of worship.⁴⁸ As a rule, the established churches have no contact with the home churches.⁴⁹ Iranian home churches do not usually carry out baptisms, either for theological or security reasons.⁵⁰

It is impossible to estimate the number of home churches due to their unofficial status. The nature of the home church movement is very informal, spontaneous and local.⁵¹ Active home church activities have been reported to operate across the country, particularly in Tehran, Rasht, Shiraz and Isfahan. Some of the home churches are part of a more extensive network, operated from abroad by Christian organisations. Pastors act as the link between the home

³⁹ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.10-11

⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.13

⁴¹ *ibid.* p.23

⁴² DIS 2014 p.32–34

⁴³ Small Media 2014 p.56

⁴⁴ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.10; IHRDC 11 Jun 2012

⁴⁵ ICHRI 2013

⁴⁶ IHRDC 7/2015

⁴⁷ DIS 2014 p.32–35

⁴⁸ ICHRI 2013 p.21–23

⁴⁹ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.19-20

⁵⁰ ICHRI 2013 p.56–57

⁵¹ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.18

church and the organisation.⁵² At most a dozen people convene in individual home churches in order to not attract the attention of the neighbourhood. The leaders of the home churches have often taken courses in Christianity in neighbouring countries such as Turkey or Armenia, or received training over Skype via Christian networks proselytising in Iran.⁵³

In recent years, the authorities have started taking more drastic measures against home churches, and monitoring and awareness of their activities have increased. In the past three years, arrests have clearly become more common, with home church leaders spending longer periods under arrest.⁵⁴ In particular, home churches with links to Christian organisations operating abroad, such as Elam operating from Great Britain and the United States, attract interest from the authorities.⁵⁵ Membership in Elam may lead to charges of belonging to a group acting against the Islamic Republic.⁵⁶ The Protestant church led by Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani was among those targeted. Its centre is in Rasht (a total of 1,000 members, 600 to 700 of whom live in Rasht).⁵⁷ The church is a network of home churches with no links to officially operating churches.⁵⁸

Being a member of a home church, proselytising, participating in a Christian conference abroad, and the possession of Christian materials – such as bibles or other religious literature, and crosses – may lead to problems with the authorities.⁵⁹ Home church members have also sometimes been reported to have been charged with holding illegal meetings and with the use of alcohol during communion.⁶⁰ The authorities have only a minor interest in religious practice done in private, and their actions are primarily targeted at home churches and active proselytising.⁶¹

3. APOSTASY AND CRITICISING ISLAM IN IRANIAN LEGISLATION

The majority of Islamic theological scholars are of the opinion that a Muslim cannot change his or her faith, although the Quran does not give an explicit answer to this question.⁶² In accordance with the principle established during the classical period, the majority of Shia legal scholars have taken the position that a death sentence is the consequence of relinquishing Islam. The founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, has given a legal opinion confirming the interpretation prevalent amongst Shia scholars.⁶³ Iranian courts have quite universally referred to this position presented by Khomeini in his legal work *Tahrir al-Vasila*.⁶⁴

In Shia tradition, those relinquishing Islam are traditionally divided into two categories: innate apostates who were born and raised as Muslims (*mortad-e fetri*) and non-native 'national apostates', who converted to Islam at some point in their lives (*mortad-e melli*). In accordance with Khomeini's ruling, only national apostates will be given an opportunity to repent their relinquishing of the faith before they may be executed. According to the dominant Shia position, women are not executed for leaving Islam; instead, they are imprisoned for life or until they repent.⁶⁵

⁵² DIS 2014 p.21-23

⁵³ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.19-20

⁵⁴ DIS 2014 p.32

⁵⁵ ICHRI 2013 p.50

⁵⁶ IHRDC 7/2014 p.31

⁵⁷ IHRDC 18 Jan 2013

⁵⁸ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.19-20

⁵⁹ ICHRI 2013 p.7

⁶⁰ DIS 2014 p.30

⁶¹ ICHRI 2013 p.43

⁶² IHRDC 7/2014 p.5-7

⁶³ *ibid.* p.2

⁶⁴ ICHRI 2013 p.31

⁶⁵ IHRDC 7/2014 p.8-9

There are differences of opinion amongst Iran's high-ranking clerics concerning what kind of actions are sufficient grounds for apostasy, or relinquishing Islam.⁶⁶ The Criminal Code of Iran does not include relinquishing Islam as a punishable offence, but apostasy convictions are still possible under the constitution. The article 167 decrees that should there not be a written law, the judge must invoke the principles of Islamic law.⁶⁷ The article 220 of the Criminal Code confirms this.⁶⁸ The Criminal Code of Iran also includes articles that enable prosecution based on criticism of the dominant religion. The most significant of these is blasphemy (*sabb-e nabi*, literally 'insulting the prophet'), for which the punishment is death just as for apostasy.⁶⁹ Death sentences for blasphemy (*sabb-e nabi*) have been passed mostly on Shia Muslims who have criticised Islam.⁷⁰ Because the sections concerning apostasy and blasphemy are defined vaguely in the legislation, it is ambiguous on what grounds a person can be accused of these crimes.⁷¹

Chapter 5 of the Criminal Code of Iran, covering discretionary *ta'zirat* crimes, also defines punishments for acts that are offensive to religious values.⁷² The article 513 of Chapter 5 of the Criminal Code (*ehanat be moqadasat*) decrees one to five years of imprisonment for offending religious values. Charges of offending religious values have resulted from acts such as criticism of the Islamic practice of wearing a headscarf, the sharia law, the *velayat-e faqih* mode of government and following the Shia grand ayatollahs as sources of emulation.⁷³ The Criminal Code also decrees the act of insulting the Supreme Leaders Khomeini and Khomeini punishable by six months to two years of imprisonment under the article 514 of Chapter 5. The law does not define in any further detail what is deemed to be an insult and what is, for instance, normal criticism.⁷⁴

Converting to another religion from Islam is a very sensitive topic from the perspective of the Iranian regime. Several people have been accused in court of relinquishing Islam, but in the overwhelming majority of the cases, apostasy was just one charge among several others.⁷⁵ Apostasy charges have very seldom ended up in court, let alone resulting in a conviction.⁷⁶ In documented cases, there have not only been religious but also political reasons in the background that have shaped the positions taken by the judges.⁷⁷ Christian converts are under threat of arrest, but death sentences under sharia law for apostasy or blasphemy have been extremely rare for them.⁷⁸ The apostasy convictions of Christian converts have evoked major international condemnation, due to which they have been embarrassing for Iran's judicial system.⁷⁹

Lately, the most severe apostasy and blasphemy convictions have been handed down for repudiating basic Shia tenets.⁸⁰ Questioning the official interpretation of Shiism of the Islamic Republic of Iran can be particularly dangerous, especially if done by a religiously or otherwise influential individual.⁸¹ Such apostasy convictions in the 2000s in Iran have included the case of Hasan

⁶⁶ *ibid.* p.4-5

⁶⁷ Constitution of Iran 1979 Article 167; IHRDC 7/2014 p.10–11

⁶⁸ Criminal Code of Iran 2013 Article 220; IHRDC 7/2014 p.10–11

⁶⁹ Criminal Code of Iran 2013 Articles 262–263

⁷⁰ IHRDC 7/2014 p.27–29

⁷¹ *ibid.* p.2-3

⁷² Criminal Code of Iran 2013 Article 513 (Chapter 5: 1996); IHRDC 7/2014 p.12–13

⁷³ IHRDC 7/2014 p.19, 22

⁷⁴ Criminal Code of Iran 2013 Article 513 (Chapter 5: 1996)

⁷⁵ IHRDC 7/2014 p.15

⁷⁶ ICHRI 2013 p.31–32; IHRDC 7/2014

⁷⁷ IHRDC 7/2014

⁷⁸ Guardian 1 Jun 2015; IHRDC 7/2014

⁷⁹ DIS 2014

⁸⁰ e.g. IHRDC 20 Jun 2015

⁸¹ IHRDC 7/2014

Yousefi Eshkevari, a Shia scholar of theology and former member of the parliament in 2000, who was ultimately sentenced to four and a half years of imprisonment for offending religious values instead of apostasy⁸²; the case of Professor Hashem Aghajari who criticised Islam and was first sentenced to death, but whose sentence was later reduced to five years of imprisonment for offending religious values⁸³; and the 2011 execution of Sayed Ali (Abdolreza) Ghara-bat, who claimed to be a god and gathered followers, for apostasy and inciting prostitution.⁸⁴ A recent example is the apostasy conviction of Hesameddin Farzizade handed down by the criminal court of the City of Ardabil for repudiation of Shia tenets in his book. The conviction is being appealed, and its legality is questioned because in Iran, courts lower than provincial criminal courts may not pass death sentences.⁸⁵

The only Christian convert executed for apostasy, Hosein Soodmand, a pastor of the Jama'at-e Rabbani congregation, was hanged in Mashhad in 1990.⁸⁶ After Soodmand, the only apostasy convictions of Christian converts confirmed by the courts of appeal were those of Mehdi Dibaj in 1994 and Youcef Nadarkhani in 2010.⁸⁷ Mehdi Dibaj's apostasy charge in the 1990s led to his death in unclear circumstances after he was released from prison.⁸⁸ Apostasy charges against pastors who had converted to Christianity became more common in first-instance criminal courts in 2009–2010.⁸⁹ The best known examples from recent years have been the case of Pastor Davood who had become a Protestant, where, after having fled the country, he was ultimately sentenced in absentia to two years of imprisonment for propaganda against the regime and membership in a forbidden group⁹⁰; and the case of Protestant pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, in which he was sentenced to death for apostasy but was ultimately imprisoned for three years for 'evangelising'.⁹¹ Nadarkhani has presumably continued his activities in the church after being released from prison, but he was briefly arrested at Christmas 2012.⁹²

4. PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIAN CONVERTS IN IRAN

The 1980s and 1990s were the darkest period for Christians in Iran.⁹³ The situation of the Christians started deteriorating again, particularly from 2009 onwards, and it has not improved under the current president, Hassan Rouhani.⁹⁴ Christian converts became the target of increased interest by the authorities already at the start of the first term of former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, but the persecution of home churches, Christian converts and Persian-language Protestant churches intensified in 2009, when widespread protests broke out after the re-election of Ahmadinejad.⁹⁵

The situation of Christians has continued to deteriorate during the term of President Hassan Rouhani.⁹⁶ According to the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran Ahmed Shaheed, it appears that, against general expectations and election promises, the overall human rights situation in Iran has deteriorated as the attention given to the nuclear negotiations has dwarfed that

⁸² Case details: IHRDC 7/2014 p.16–21

⁸³ IHRDC 7/2014 p.22–26

⁸⁴ IHRDC 7/2014 p.26–27

⁸⁵ IHRDC 20 Jun 2015

⁸⁶ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.25; IHRDC 7/2014 p.31–32

⁸⁷ ICHRI 2013 p.31

⁸⁸ *ibid.* p.8

⁸⁹ FIDH 2010 p.21

⁹⁰ IHRDC 7/2014 p.29–31

⁹¹ *ibid.* p.32–34

⁹² DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.26

⁹³ Sanasarian 2000 p.125; DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.7-8

⁹⁴ DIS 2014 p.25-28

⁹⁵ ICHRI 2013 p.9, 24

⁹⁶ DIS 2014 p.8

given to human rights.⁹⁷ According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, more people than before have been arrested on religious grounds during Rouhani's term.⁹⁸ Christians have also faced greater persecution than before during Rouhani's term.⁹⁹ Typical human rights violations, which Christian converts have been subjected to, are arrests, prison sentences and criminal charges.¹⁰⁰ Human rights organisations have lately reported a strong upturn in assaults on Christians in prison.¹⁰¹ Christian websites such as *Article 18*, *Mohabbat News*, *Farsi Christian News Network* and *Christian Solidarity Worldwide* follow the situation of Christians in Iran and give detailed reports of the cases.¹⁰²

4.1. Christian converts as a national security threat

The years 2010 and 2011 saw a policy change take place in Iran in attitudes to unrecognised religious minorities. As recently as 2009–2010, the judicial system urged trying the cases of converts from Islam as apostasy, making the charges more common. Regular criminal courts were, however, reluctant to handle difficult cases of apostasy which also resulted in a great deal of international condemnation.¹⁰³ At the end of 2010, as a result of a policy change, conversion to Christianity and other forbidden activities by religious minorities were now defined more as threats to national security. In May-June 2012, the Revolutionary Guard's intelligence service assumed responsibility for home church raids from the Ministry of the Interior, and revolutionary courts started trying the cases of converts from Islam.¹⁰⁴ In Iran, criminal charges based solely on religion – apostasy, blasphemy and offending religious values – are tried in regular criminal courts, but, because the cases usually include charges of endangering national security, the cases have been moved to revolutionary courts.¹⁰⁵ The cause of this change in strategy could be the widespread international attention resulting from apostasy convictions, while charges related to endangering national security do not stand out as much from other political cases.¹⁰⁶

In 2010, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei gave a policy speech in Qom, where he defined religious movements such as Bahá'í, Sufism, Wahhabism and the home church networks of Christians as a threat to national security.¹⁰⁷ As a result of the policy change, the apostasy charges considered troublesome by regular courts became even rarer than before. They were replaced by charges of endangering national security and tried in revolutionary courts. Since 2010, the most typical charges for Christian converts have been endangering national security, membership in groups trying to overthrow the Islamic Republic, propaganda against the regime, and offending religious values.¹⁰⁸ Despite the political nature of the charges, the authorities have during interrogations still focused on relinquishing Islam.¹⁰⁹ The involvement of the Revolutionary Guard has made the raids more arbitrary and unpredictable.¹¹⁰

4.2. Arrests of Christian converts

⁹⁷ Guardian 16 Mar 2015

⁹⁸ USCIRF 30 Apr 2015

⁹⁹ UK COI 2014 p.5; UCHRI 2015

¹⁰⁰ ICHRI 2013 p.41–46

¹⁰¹ USCIRF 2015 p.46–47

¹⁰² Links to the organisations' websites can be found in the source list

¹⁰³ DIS 2014 p.7-9

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.* p.7-9; ICHRI 2013 p.7, 54

¹⁰⁵ Landinfo 2011 p.14–15

¹⁰⁶ DIS 2014 p.30-32

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.* p.26

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.* p.30–32

¹⁰⁹ IHRDC 7/2014 p.31; ICHRI p.49–50

¹¹⁰ DIS 2014 p.27–28

According to the UN rapporteur on human rights in Iran, at least 92 Christians were under arrest at the beginning of 2015.¹¹¹ The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center IHRDC has listed a total of 907 political prisoners in the country in July 2015. According to the organisation, 256 of them were arrested on religious grounds: 108 are Sunni Muslims, 86 Bahá'í, 26 Christian converts, 19 Sufi, 10 *ahl-e haqq*s (yarsan), 3 Sunni converts, 1 Zoroastrian, 1 *erfan-e halqe* leader, 2 Shia dissidents, and two unclear cases.¹¹²

Since 2010, a total of 500 Christians are estimated to have been arrested.¹¹³ At Christmas 2010, the Iranian intelligence service discovered a network of home churches organised by Elam. According to the organisation, the intelligence service has since arrested around 300 members of the network, which has made organised home church activities even more difficult.¹¹⁴ The largest number of arrests of Evangelical Christians took place at Christmas 2010, when around 60 to 70 members of Jam'at-e Rabbani and home churches operating in Tehran and Isfahan were detained in a single operation.¹¹⁵ The arrests of pastors of home churches and evangelical official churches in 2010 culminated in Youcef Nadarkhani's apostasy conviction, although he was ultimately released. Nadarkhani had been arrested already in October 2009 for demanding exemption to the children of Christian converts from mandatory Quran classes.¹¹⁶

As of 2015, the longest sentences handed down on imprisoned pastors have ranged from six to ten years for crimes related to national security.¹¹⁷ They have been convicted on political grounds for propaganda against the regime (proselytising), endangering national security (home church activities) and conspiring with enemy states (connections to international Christian organisations). There is no certain information on the number of Christians who have been arrested, because many are afraid to go public after their arrest. According to Christian organisations operating in Iran, the actual numbers are clearly higher than those reported by the media.¹¹⁸

The authorities typically arrest several members of the same home church at one time and raid their homes, confiscating materials related to Christianity. The intelligence service acting under the Ministry of the Interior, and lately more often the Revolutionary Guard, have been responsible for the raids and for closing down churches.¹¹⁹ Home churches are raided particularly actively at Christmas. In addition to Christmas 2010, extensive mass arrests of Christians and the closing down of evangelising churches have been reported in several Iranian cities particularly during the first months of 2012. In these cases, several dozen home church members were arrested at a time, most of whom were, however, released soon after their arrest.¹²⁰ Christmas 2014 also saw the familiar 'Christmas present raids' of home churches.¹²¹ Raids have also taken place during Easter.¹²²

As for regular members arrested during home church raids, the interest of the authorities is usually limited to gathering information on the operations. They are usually released after a short time, but this often requires them to denounce public Christian activities, and they are left uncertain of any charges possibly brought up against them. In many cases, no charges are

¹¹¹ UN 12 Mar 2015 p.15

¹¹² IHRDC 8 Jul 2015

¹¹³ USCIRF 2015 p.46–47

¹¹⁴ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.21

¹¹⁵ Landinfo 2011 p.20

¹¹⁶ FIDH 2010 p.21

¹¹⁷ USCIRF 2015 p.46–47; IHRDC 8 Jul 2015

¹¹⁸ ICHRI 2013 p.41

¹¹⁹ *ibid.* p.41–43

¹²⁰ *ibid.* p.42, 55

¹²¹ USCIRF 2015 p.46–47

¹²² HRANA 24 May 2014

brought up at all, but the persons may still be under surveillance after their release.¹²³ During the interrogations, the authorities often attempt to obtain information on other members of the home church. In several cases, the interrogators have threatened the arrested persons with the death penalty, continuing their arrest, or arresting their family members, if they refuse to cooperate.¹²⁴ The duration of pretrial detentions has varied from a couple of hours to 18 months, with the longest documented pretrial detention lasting over three years.¹²⁵ Most people arrested during home church raids are, however, released within a couple of days without any official charges. However, the authorities interrogate all members and may threaten them with apostasy charges in order to pressure the members to relinquish Christian activities.¹²⁶

As a rule, mostly high-profile cases go to trial.¹²⁷ First time offenders arrested during a home church raid are usually released after interrogation, if they sign a commitment not to participate in public Christian activities such as home church services or proselytising.¹²⁸ Most Christian converts are released on bail. The bail amounts are deliberately high in order to cause a financial burden to the accused, and the accused usually have to mortgage their homes in order to make bail.¹²⁹ According to the human rights organisation ICHRI, the bail amounts vary between two thousand and two hundred thousand dollars.¹³⁰ People who have been detained even for a long time can be released on bail without any official charges brought up against them. The purpose of extended detention is to scare the converts into ceasing their activities or to pressure them to cooperate with the authorities, for example as an informant.¹³¹ After being released on bail, the authorities may pressure the accused to leave the country, or prevent them from getting a job or renting an apartment. Christian converts released on bail do not appear to have difficulties in leaving the country; this is believed to be an easier alternative for the state than trials that cause international condemnation.¹³²

4.3. Unofficial persecution of Christians

The law does not offer protection for people who have publicly relinquished Islam, which puts them in a vulnerable position with the authorities. According to many religious scholars – including Ayatollah Khomeini – killing an apostate or a blasphemer without trial is allowed.¹³³ The Criminal Code of Iran protects a person who has killed a perpetrator of one of the most serious crimes from the most severe *qesas* retribution punishments.¹³⁴

Converts from religious families may face trouble with their own relatives, if their relatives become aware of the conversion. Those living in religious neighbourhoods may also become the target of their neighbours' attention if they do not visit the mosque and participate in other Muslim religious practices. Converts with relatives working in government jobs may be subjected to pressure, as the family members are afraid of losing their reputation or post.¹³⁵ For reasons of greed, or, for instance, child custody issues, relatives may also turn in their family member who

¹²³ DIS 2014 p.28–30

¹²⁴ ICHRI 2013 p.47

¹²⁵ *ibid.* p.43–46

¹²⁶ DIS 2014 p.32

¹²⁷ *ibid.* p.30-32

¹²⁸ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.29; ICHRI 2013 p.43-46

¹²⁹ DIS 2014 p.30

¹³⁰ ICHRI 2013 p.43

¹³¹ DIS 2014 p.10

¹³² *ibid.* p.31-32

¹³³ IHRDC 7/2014 p.14

¹³⁴ Criminal Code of Iran 2013 Article 302(a); 612

¹³⁵ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.32; DIS 2014

has converted to Christianity to the police because, according to Iranian law, no-one except another Muslim may inherit a Muslim or raise a Muslim child.¹³⁶

In 1994–1996, some unsolved murders of high-profile evangelical protestant Christian pastors took place in Iran.¹³⁷ At that time, the operating procedures of the Iranian intelligence service also included the serial killings of other high-profile opponents of the regime.¹³⁸ Mehdi Dibaj, who was sentenced to death in 1993 but later released after ten years of imprisonment, was found dead in the woods six months after his release. Dibaj, who had been in prison since 1982, was known for his strong conviction to proselytise, which was ultimately his undoing.¹³⁹ Pastor Haik Hovsepian-Mehr, who had strongly campaigned for Dibaj, was found dead eleven days after Dibaj's death. Hovsepian, the assassinated leader of the Council of Protestant Churches of Iran, was the only leader of a Christian church (Jama'at-e Rabbani), who publicly refused to end proselytising or to prevent Muslims' entry into his church.¹⁴⁰ In 1994, another Protestant pastor and Hovsepian's successor, Tateos Mikaelian, was murdered, and in 1996, Pastor Mohammad Bagher Yusefi who was active in Jama'at-e Rabbani.¹⁴¹

The 2000s also saw reports on some unclear deaths of Christians. In 2005, Ghorban Tourani, a pastor of a home church network, was murdered in front of his home.¹⁴² In 2007, Mohammad Jaberi and Ali Jafarzade, who were also active in home churches, were killed, while Abbas Amiri and his wife were killed in 2008.¹⁴³ Even today, the interrogators of the intelligence service may threaten Christians with death, either through an apostasy conviction or, for instance, the possibility of being run over by a car.¹⁴⁴ People tortured in prison have also been threatened with an 'accidental' death if they talk about their experience.¹⁴⁵

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.¹⁴⁶

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¹³⁶ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.32

¹³⁷ ICHRI 2013 p.35–39

¹³⁸ *ibid.* p.38

¹³⁹ Sanasarian 2000 p.124–125

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.74

¹⁴¹ ICHRI 2013 p.8-9; Sanasarian 2000 p.124-125; DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.7-8

¹⁴² ICHRI 2013 p.9

¹⁴³ FIDH 2010 p.21

¹⁴⁴ IHRDC 7/2014 p.30; ICHRI 2013 p.39

¹⁴⁵ ICHRI 2013 p.10

¹⁴⁶ DIS, Landinfo & DRC 2013 p.31

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