

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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Questions

- 1. Please provide an update on the research requests already done on the topic of Muslim conversion to Christianity in Iran.**
- 2. What is the current situation in Iran for Muslims who have converted to Christianity?**
- 3. What is the situation like for followers of the Armenian Orthodox Church in Iran?**
- 4. Does the Armenian Orthodox Church proselytise in Iran?**

RESPONSE

- 1. Please provide an update on the research requests already done on the topic of Muslim conversion to Christianity in Iran.**

RRT Research Response IRN32295 provides information on Muslim converts to Christianity in Iran, and this is updated in Question 2 below. *RRT Research Response IRN31238* provides information on apostasy, addressed in Question 2, and proselytising in Iran, addressed in Question 4 below (RRT Research & Information 2007, *Research Response IRN32295*, 24 September – Attachment 4; RRT Country Research 2007, *Research Response IRN 31238*, 24 January – Attachment 5).

- 2. What is the current situation in Iran for Muslims who have converted to Christianity?**

Update on apostasy in Iran – introduction of death penalty legislation for apostates

A May 2008 report from the *US News and World Report* provides information on the lives of Christian converts in Iran. The report notes that apostasy “has long invited reprisals from the

Iranian government, forcing [converts] into absolute secrecy, practicing their new beliefs only in the privacy of their home". The report notes the introduction of legislation mandating the death penalty for apostates, but reports claims by the president of the Institute on Religion and Public Policy that "[i]nternational pressure and attention...has significantly slowed the parliament's progress" in passing the bill. Information is also provided on the different types of apostates recognised under the legislation, including the distinction between the 'innate' apostate (*fetri*), "who has at least one Muslim parent, identifies as a Muslim after puberty, and later renounces Islam"; and the 'parental' apostate (*melli*), "who is a non-Muslim at birth but later embraces Islam, only to renounce it again". According to the report, the "draft code says outright that punishment for an innate apostate is death. However, parental apostates have three days after their sentencing to recant their beliefs. If they don't, they will be executed according to their sentence":

The counsellor was able to put Illyas in touch with some local Iranians – also discreet believers – who could provide a copy of the Bible. "We were looking for a faith that offered the reassurance of freedom," says Illyas, who asked to be interviewed in a public restaurant in Tehran instead of his house.

Islam is the state religion of Iran, governing most aspects of life since the 1979 Islamic revolution. But, exasperated with the obsessive atmosphere of Islamic purity in Iran since the revolution and the subsequent curbing of social freedoms, Illyas says, his family felt compelled to look for other spiritual answers, even at considerable risk.

Leaving Islam for another religion, or apostasy, has long invited reprisals from the Iranian government, forcing the likes of Illyas and his family into absolute secrecy, practicing their new beliefs only in the privacy of their home. In Iran, Christians are prohibited from seeking Muslim converts, although there has been tolerance for those who are born into Christian families.

The government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has introduced legislation before the Iranian Majlis that would mandate the death penalty for apostates from Islam, a sign that it will brook no proselytizing in the country. "Life for so-called apostates in Iran has never been easy, but it could become literally impossible if Iran passes this new draft penal code," says Joseph Grieboski, the president of the Institute on Religion and Public Policy in Washington. "For anyone who dares question the regime's religious ideology, there could soon be no room to argue—only death."

...Articles 225 to 227 of the draft penal code define two kinds of apostates: *fetri*, or an innate apostate—who has at least one Muslim parent, identifies as a Muslim after puberty, and later renounces Islam; and *melli*, or parental apostate—who is a non-Muslim at birth but later embraces Islam, only to renounce it again. The draft code says outright that punishment for an innate apostate is death. However, parental apostates have three days after their sentencing to recant their beliefs. If they don't, they will be executed according to their sentence. It isn't clear when this bill will be passed, though Grieboski says, "International pressure and attention—in large part due to our work—has significantly slowed the parliament's progress."

In the past, apostasy could draw a range of punishments, from imprisonment to death, under legal practices that were more ambiguous than the draft statutes. In one instance that drew international attention, Mehdi Dibaj, an Iranian convert, was held in prison for his Christian beliefs for 10 years starting in 1984. He received the death sentence at the end of 1993. But he was released from prison in January 1994 after an international publicity campaign by Haik Hovsepien Mehr, a prominent Christian pastor in Iran. A few days after Dibaj's release, Hovsepien Mehr was abducted in Tehran, and his body, with 26 stab wounds, was found

secretly buried in a Muslim graveyard. Six months later, Dibaj, freed but still under a pending death sentence, was abducted and murdered.

... Despite the Koran's injunction that "there is no compulsion in religion," issues of religious freedom have persisted since the Islamic revolution of 1979, and that is driving the young away from Islam, says Mohammad Ali Abtahi, a reformist cleric and former vice president of Iran. "If you force religion down people's throats, it makes them less religious, not more." Another analyst based in Tehran agrees but senses a western conspiracy in proselytising through mass media. He blames satellite television channels for emotionally manipulating Iranian viewers into changing their religion. "Iranians are looking for a balm, and proselytisers are taking advantage of that," he says. "There's a vicious western plot to foment a wider cultural East-West war and demonise Islam in the process" (Chopra, A. 2008, 'In Iran, Covert Christian Converts Live With Secrecy and Fear', *US News and World Report*, 8 May <http://www.usnews.com/articles/news/world/2008/05/08/in-iran-covert-christian-converts-live-with-secrecy-and-fear.html> – Accessed 23 June 2008 – Attachment 14).

A March 2008 report from *Adnkronos International* (an Italian news agency) notes that the Iranian parliament is to debate the death penalty legislation in its upcoming session (no sources located were able to provide updated information on whether the legislation has been enacted). The report states that "[c]urrently converts, particularly those who have decided to leave the Muslim faith for Evangelical churches, are arrested and then released after some years of detention". The report notes that the legislation "was proposed mainly because of fears of proselytising activities by Evangelical churches particularly through the use of satellite channels", and claims that there "has also been concern over fact that many young people in Iran have abandoned Islam because they're tired of the many restrictions imposed by the faith". Information is provided suggesting that violence toward Christians is often extrajudicial, as since the 1979 Islamic revolution, "at least eight Christians have been killed for their faith. Seven of them were found stabbed to death after they were kidnapped while only one, Seyyed Hossein Soudmand was condemned to death"

In its first session since last week's general elections, the new Iranian parliament is expected to discuss a law that will condemn to death anyone who decides to leave the Muslim faith and convert to other religions.

...Under the proposed law, anyone who is born to Muslim parents and decides to convert to another faith, will face the death penalty. Currently converts, particularly those who have decided to leave the Muslim faith for Evangelical churches, are arrested and then released after some years of detention.

The new legislation, which has caused concern in Iran and abroad, was proposed mainly because of fears of proselytising activities by Evangelical churches particularly through the use of satellite channels. There has also been concern over fact that many young people in Iran have abandoned Islam because they're tired of the many restrictions imposed by the faith.

According to unofficial sources, in the past five years, one million Iranians, particularly young people and women, have abandoned Islam and joined Evangelical churches. This phenomenon has surprised even the missionaries who carry out their activities in secret in Iran.

An Evangelical priest and former Muslim in Iran told *Adnkronos International* (AKI) that the conversions were "interesting, enthusiastic but very dangerous. The high number of conversions is the reason that the government has decided to make the repression of

Christians official with this new law,” said the priest on condition of anonymity. “Often we get to know about a new community that has been formed, after a lot of time, given that the people gather in homes to pray and often with rituals that they invent without any real spiritual guide,” he told AKI. “We find ourselves facing what is more than a conversion to the Christian faith,” he said. “It’s a mass exodus from Islam.”

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, at least eight Christians have been killed for their faith. Seven of them were found stabbed to death after they were kidnapped while only one, Seyyed Hossein Soudmand was condemned to death (‘Iran: Parliament to discuss death penalty for converts who leave Islam’ 2008, *Adnkronos International*, 19 March <http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/English/Religion/?id=1.0.1988866222> – Accessed 23 June 2008 – Attachment 8).

The US-based NGO the Institute on Religion and Public Policy (IRPP) reported in February 2008 that the Iranian government had released draft legislation “mandating the death penalty for converts who leave Islam”. The report claims that the legislation “for the first time in Iranian history legislates the death penalty for apostasy”, and quotes the president of the IRPP claiming that the “penal code is gross violation of fundamental and human rights by a regime that has repeatedly abused religious and other minorities”:

The Iranian Parliament is reviewing a draft penal code that for the first time in Iranian history legislates the death penalty for apostasy. The draft clearly violates Iran’s commitments under the International Covenants on Human Rights, to which the State is party.

“The draft penal code is gross violation of fundamental and human rights by a regime that has repeatedly abused religious and other minorities,” stated Institute on Religion and Public Policy President Joseph K. Grieboski. “This is simply another legislative attempt on the part of the Iranian regime to persecute religious minorities in the country and around the globe, especially Bahá’ís.”

...Article 225-7 of the code states, “Punishment for an Innate Apostate is death,” while Article 225-8 says, “Punishment for a Parental Apostate is death, but after the final sentencing for three days he/she would be guided to the right path and encouraged to recant his/her belief and if he/she refused, the death penalty would be carried out” (‘Institute Denounces Draft Iranian Penal Code; Death Sentence Legislated for ‘Apostasy’ 2008, Institute on Religion and Public Policy website, 5 February <http://www.religionandpolicy.org/show.php?p=1.1.2001> – Accessed 23 June 2008 – Attachment 6; for the full text of the bill, see: Islamic Republic of Iran 2008, ‘Proposed Bill for Islamic Penal Law (Penal Code) – Section Five: Apostasy, Heresy and Witchcraft’, Institute on Religion and Public Policy website, 5 February <http://www.religionandpolicy.org/show.php?p=1.1.2000> – Accessed 23 June 2008 – Attachment 7).

Update on treatment of Christian converts

Several May and June 2008 reports sourced from *Compass Direct* (a Christian monitoring group) attest to official harassment of Christian converts in Iran, reporting multiple arrests and detention without charge in Shiraz, charges of activities against “our holy religion” and “the country”, and the detention of a house church leader in Tehran:

- On 21 May, a report claimed 12 Christian converts had been arrested in Shiraz over the past ten days, as police “cracked down against known Muslim converts to Christianity”. Four Christians arrested at Shiraz International airport were jailed and “were subjected to hours of interrogation”, with police “questioning them solely ‘just

about their faith and house church activities’”, according to an Iranian source quoted by *Compass*. The report states that one of the arrested men remains in prison, and that “[c]onverts from Islam are routinely subjected to both physical and psychological mistreatment while being held for days or weeks, usually in solitary confinement” (‘Iran: Police arrest 12 Christian converts’ 2008, *Compass Direct*, 21 May <http://www.compassdirect.org/en/display.php?page=news&idelement=5386&lang=en&length=short&backpage=archives&critere=Iran&countryname=&rowcur=0> – Accessed 23 June 2008 – Attachment 9).

- On 28 May, *Compass* reported that a Christian convert arrested in Shiraz on 11 May had not been released, although “no known charges” had been laid against him. The report quotes police officials telling family members of the jailed man that “[h]e is not cooperating with us, so he has to stay in our custody”, and *Compass* claims that “[c]onverts from Islam are regularly subjected to harassment, arrest and surveillance in Iran, and the Islamist regime has criminalized attempts by Muslim citizens to change or renounce their religion” (‘Iran: Authorities refuse to release Christian convert’ 2008, *Compass Direct*, 28 May <http://www.compassdirect.org/en/display.php?page=news&idelement=5392&lang=en&length=short&backpage=archives&critere=Iran&countryname=&rowcur=0> – Accessed 23 June 2008 – Attachment 10).
- A June 3 report states that “Two Iranian converts to Christianity jailed for the past few weeks have been released by authorities, who demanded valuable property deeds as bail collateral”. According to the report, the two men were charged with “‘activities against our holy religion’, requiring a bail guarantee worth US\$20,000”, and that six other converts had been charged with “activities against the country”. The *Compass* report also claims that “[t]wo other former Muslims arrested in a Shiraz park on May 13 remain jailed, their location and condition unknown”, and that “[a]nother Christian convert arrested with his wife in late April in the northern city of Amol, in Mazandaran province, was ordered released three days ago, required to post bail with a huge deposit based on the worth of his home”. An Iranian pastor living abroad is quoted as stating that “‘This is the pattern they usually follow ... put them in jail for a few weeks, beat them, and put a lot of pressure on them to get information about the other converts” (‘Iran: Two Christian prisoners released on bail’ 2008, *Compass Direct*, 3 June <http://www.compassdirect.org/en/display.php?page=news&idelement=5404&lang=en&length=short&backpage=index&critere=&countryname=&rowcur=150> – Accessed 23 June 2008 – Attachment 11).
- On 9 June, *Compass* reported that “Iran continued a wave of arrests against Christians in recent weeks, detaining a Tehran house church leader who was previously held and tortured for religious activity”. The report states that “his location remains unknown” (‘Iran: Christian arrested without charges’ 2008, *Compass Direct*, 9 June <http://www.compassdirect.org/en/display.php?page=news&idelement=5421&lang=en&length=short&backpage=archives&critere=&countryname=&rowcur=0> – Accessed 23 June 2008 – Attachment 12).

The US Department of State’s 2008 *Country Report on Human Rights Practices* for Iran states that “[t]he authorities became particularly vigilant in recent years in curbing proselytising activities by evangelical Christians. Some unofficial 2004 estimates indicated

that there were approximately 100,000 Muslim-born citizens who had converted to Christianity”. Amnesty International’s 2008 report on human rights practices in Iran states that “[i]n September [2007], a couple – a Christian convert who married a Christian woman in an Islamic ceremony – were reportedly flogged in Gohar Dasht in connection with their faith” (US Department of State 2008, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices – Iran*, 11 March – Attachment 2; Amnesty International 2008, *State of the World’s Human Rights – Iran* – Attachment 3).

A May 2008 report from Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) calls on the Iranian government to “stop the arbitrary detention and systematic discrimination of non-Muslims in Iran”. The report claims that jailed “converts have often been asked to recant their Christian faith and are only released after signing documents obliging them to refrain from evangelistic activities”. According to CSW, religious minorities “who abide within the strict boundaries set for them by the Iranian state are able enjoy relative religious freedom”, but Muslim converts to Christianity “face the constant threat of serious human rights abuses, including the fear of physical harm”:

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is calling for the immediate release of detained Baha’is and Christians in Iran, who have been arrested and held without charge since early May.

...during the last three weeks, at least 12 Muslim converts to Christianity have been arrested and detained by Iranian police. According to Compass News, three of them are still being held in undisclosed locations.

This follows various other cases of detention of converts across Iran throughout 2008. During detention, converts have often been asked to recant their Christian faith and are only released after signing documents obliging them to refrain from evangelistic activities.

...CSW has recently returned from a fact finding visit to Iran. Although Christian and Jewish minorities who abide within the strict boundaries set for them by the Iranian state are able enjoy relative religious freedom, Baha’is and Muslims who have converted to the Christian faith face the constant threat of serious human rights abuses, including the fear of physical harm.

Stuart Windsor, National Director of CSW, said: “The Iranian government must immediately release all detained Baha’is and Christians without charge and stop the arbitrary detention and systematic discrimination of non-Muslims in Iran” (‘Iran: CSW calls for the release of minority leaders amid concerns over deteriorating religious freedom in Iran’ 2008, Christian Solidarity Worldwide website, 30 May <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=743> – Accessed 23 June 2008 – Attachment 13).

The US Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* for 2007 provides descriptions of the treatment of Muslim converts to Christianity in Iran over the last four years, citing several cases in which converts have been arrested, charged with assorted crimes or threatened with prosecution, held without charge for several weeks, and, in one case, murdered:

On July 24, 2006, authorities arrested Issa Motamedi Mojdehi, a Muslim convert to Christianity, following his attempt to register the birth of his son. Charges of drug trafficking were brought against him, which Christian groups said was an attempt to punish him for his conversion.

On May 2, 2006, a Muslim convert to Christianity, Ali Kaboli, was taken into custody in Gorgan, after several years of police surveillance, and threatened with prosecution if he did not leave the country. He was interrogated and was held incommunicado before being released on June 12, 2006.

On November 22, 2005, a Muslim convert to Christianity, Ghorban Tori, was kidnapped from his house in the northeast and killed. His body was later returned to his house. Tori was a pastor at an independent house church of converted Christians. After the killing, security officials searched his house for Bibles and banned Christian books in Persian. In the previous week, according to some sources, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security arrested and tortured 10 Christians in several cities.

In 2004 sources reported the arrest of several dozen evangelical Christians in the north, including a Christian pastor, his wife, and their two teenage children in Chalous, Mazandaran Province. The Government released many of those arrested, including the pastor and his family, after 6 weeks in detention.

In 2004 security officials raided the annual general conference of the country's Assemblies of God Church, arresting approximately 80 religious leaders gathered at the church's denominational center in Karaj. Assemblies of God Pastor Hamid Pourmand, a former Muslim who converted to Christianity nearly 25 years ago and who led a congregation in Bushehr, was the only detainee not released. In late January 2005 he was tried in a military court on charges of espionage, and on February 16, 2005, he was found guilty and sentenced to 3 years. Pourmand, who was a noncommissioned officer, was discharged from the army and forfeited his entire income, pension, and housing for his family. A website documenting persecution of Christians reported that Pourmand was released on July 20, 2006 (US Department of State 2007, *International Religious Freedom Report – Iran*, September 14 – Attachment 1).

3. What is the situation like for followers of the Armenian Orthodox Church in Iran?

Few sources providing recent information regarding the situation of Armenian Orthodox Christians in Iran could be located for this response. The US Department of State's 2008 report on human rights practices in Iran noted that "[t]here were indications that members of all religious minorities were emigrating at a high rate, although it was unclear if the reasons for emigration were religious or related to overall poor economic conditions". A May 2008 report from Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) claims that religious minorities "who abide within the strict boundaries set for them by the Iranian state are able to enjoy relative religious freedom" (US Department of State 2008, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices – Iran*, 11 March – Attachment 2; 'Iran: CSW calls for the release of minority leaders amid concerns over deteriorating religious freedom in Iran' 2008, Christian Solidarity Worldwide website, 30 May <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=743> – Accessed 23 June 2008 – Attachment 13).

A June 2008 report in *The Christian Century*, a US-based magazine, provides an assessment of the situation for Christians in Iran based on a field trip to the country and interviews with church leaders and members:

When we visited Archbishop Sebouh Sarkissian of the Armenian Orthodox Church in Iran, he told us that whether the country has religious freedom depends on what is meant by freedom. It also depends on which religious body you're talking about. The Armenian Orthodox Church doesn't pose much of a threat to the government because it is a "national church," identified with an ethnic population. And the Orthodox are not inclined to proselytize. Their

church, whose membership is about 100,000, is losing 2,000 to 3,000 members every year to emigration.

Outside a museum in Esfahan that keeps alive the memory of the Armenian genocide in Turkey, I asked an Armenian student what life is like for him in Iran as a non-Muslim. He responded, "That's a dangerous question" (Kauffman, R. 2008, 'First person encounters – Inside Iran', *The Christian Century*, 17 June – Attachment 15).

A February 2008 report sourced from the *Washington Post* reports claims that a US government programme designed to help religious minorities escape persecution in Iran (run by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, or HIAS) has resulted in Armenian Orthodox Church "members...leaving mainly to take advantage of the program's offer of a streamlined path to legal residence in the United States for a fee of \$3,000". The report quotes "leaders of Iran's non-Muslim religious minority groups" (although not Armenian Orthodox) claiming that "their communities are not mistreated by the Iranian government", and also quotes an Armenian businessman in Tehran, who states "I guess our reasons for migrating are no different from other Iranians who want to go. But as Christians, it's so much easier for us to leave Iran". Nonetheless, the report also quotes a "former US official familiar with HIAS" who claims that "persecution for non-Muslims continues", and that "Christians and others are treated like third-class citizens". The former US official concludes by stating that "to say they're living an okay life and they're just economic refugees is ridiculous":

For decades the United States has funded an effort intended to help Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews escape persecution in Iran. Now some of their leaders are questioning American motives as sects that have endured here for thousands of years dwindle rapidly as a result of the migration.

Since the late 1980s, the U.S. government has made it easier for certain foreigners fleeing religious oppression overseas, such as in the former Soviet Union or Indochina, to immigrate to America.

But leaders of Iran's non-Muslim religious minority groups say their communities are not mistreated by the Iranian government, whose actions are overseen by Shiite Muslim clerics. Instead, some Christian and Zoroastrian leaders say, their members are leaving mainly to take advantage of the program's offer of a streamlined path to legal residence in the United States for a fee of \$3,000.

...The program is coordinated by the New York-based Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, or HIAS, which traditionally has helped resettle Jews in the United States. It received about \$3.4 million in U.S. government funding last year to help non-Muslim minorities leave Iran.

...HIAS was selected early this decade by the State Department to be the sole agency for processing Iranian minorities from Vienna, where it operates what it calls an "overseas processing entity." In 2004, Congress passed a law that made it easier for religious minorities from Iran to qualify as refugees.

...One Armenian Christian businessman in Tehran, who spoke on condition of anonymity so as not to jeopardize his family's persecution-based application for legal U.S. residence, struggled to come up with a list of reasons to leave Iran. For more than a decade, he said, he had been looking for reasons to stay.

"One, our Iranian passports are useless; we need visas for every country. Two, the Iranian economy is destroyed. Three, my daughters are forced to wear the Islamic head scarf," he

said. The 2005 election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the businessman continued, had increased the sense of uncertainty. "There are foreign threats, there might be a war. We feel pressure every day."

Sitting in his dining room, he took another sip of cognac, which like all other alcoholic drinks is illegal for Muslims to consume in Iran, and smiled wearily. "I guess our reasons for migrating are no different from other Iranians who want to go. But as Christians, it's so much easier for us to leave Iran."

...The former U.S. official familiar with HIAS said persecution of non-Muslims continues. "The fact is that this regime treats religious minorities very poorly. It has acted viciously toward some of them," the former official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the program. "For Christians and others, it's a lower grade of persecution. They're treated like third-class citizens, day in and day out. If you are not a Shiite, you're going to face severe discrimination," he said. "Maybe people grow accustomed to it and may learn to live with it," the former official said. "But to say they're living an okay life and they're just economic refugees is ridiculous" (Erdbrink, T. & Brulliard, K. 2008, 'Iran's Exodus of Minorities Worries Leaders of Fading Faiths', Christians of Iraq website (source: *Washington Post*), 29 February <http://www.christiansofiraq.com/Exodusfromiraq.html> – Accessed 25 June 2008 – Attachment 20).

In an interview with "Sebough Sarkissian, Armenian archbishop in Tehran for the past eight years", reported on the *Reuters Faithworld* religious affairs blog, the archbishop responds to a question about whether Armenian Christians suffer discrimination in Iran by saying, "Not as such ... I think it is an innovation from the West, that people are coming and always asking: is there discrimination in this country? I can tell you that I've felt discrimination even in the United States, even in Europe":

Q. So you are well-treated by the authorities?

A. In this manner yes; in keeping, maintaining, the spiritual richness and religious sites of this country.

Q. Any problems facing Armenians in Iran today?

A. Generally speaking, as citizens of this country, we are facing the same difficulties that every Iranian is facing nowadays ... The Armenians, since they have been living here for centuries, they have accommodated themselves to the Iranian lifestyle. Despite having said this, sometimes as a Christian community we face difficulties.

Q. Any examples?

A. Well, for instance, the government has prepared a textbook of religion and they have imposed (a rule) on us to teach that text book... Of course they are not familiar with Christian expressions and mentality ... so that is one of the main difficulties.

Q. Do you think this book will be removed?

A. Once when I was talking to the (government) minister I asked him: 'would you accept ... that I prepare a text book on Islam, on the Koran, and ask some other Christians to come and teach it in your schools? Would you accept that?' He started laughing.

Q. Does your community experience discrimination in Iran?

A. Not as such ... I think it is an innovation from the West, that people are coming and always asking: is there discrimination in this country? I can tell you that I've felt discrimination even in the United States, even in Europe.

...Q. Have many Armenians left Iran since the revolution?

A. The process of migration regarding the Armenian community started even before the revolution ... Immigration and migration, it is a phenomenon all over the world ... not anything peculiar to Iran and Iranian society.”

Q. You don't believe it is a sign they are not well-treated?

A. No, because even Iranians are emigrating from this country, not only Christians, not only Armenians.

Q. Do you see a future for the Armenian community in Iran?

A. Yes, definitely, our existence is rooted in this soil, in this country ... I don't think we are in danger. If we are in danger it means the whole society is in danger ('A visit to an Armenian church in Islamic Iran' 2007, *Reuters Faithworld*, 24 October

<http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2007/10/24/a-visit-to-an-armenian-church-in-islamic-iran/>

– Accessed 25 June 2008 – Attachment 21).

The US Department of State's 2007 *International Religious Freedom Report* for Iran provides general information on the treatment of religious minorities, and some information specifically relating to Armenian Christians. The report states that, in theory, Armenian Orthodox Christians are a recognised religious minority and as such “are guaranteed freedom to practice their religion”, but in practice “members of these recognised minority religious groups have reported government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs”. According to the report, “[a]ll non Shi'a religious minorities suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing”. The report notes that, since the election of President Ahmadinejad in 2005, “conservative media have intensified a campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities, and political and religious leaders issued a continual stream of inflammatory statements”, and concludes that by stating that “Christians encountered societal and religious discrimination and harassment at the local, provincial, and national levels”:

Although the Constitution gives Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians the status of “protected” religious minorities, in practice non-Shi'a Muslims face substantial societal discrimination, and government actions continued to support elements of society who create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities.

...The Constitution states that “within the limits of the law,” Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognised religious minorities who are guaranteed freedom to practice their religion; however, members of these recognized minority religious groups have reported government imprisonment, harassment, intimidation, and discrimination based on their religious beliefs.

...By law, religious minorities are not allowed to be elected to a representative body or to hold senior government or military positions, with the exception that 5 of a total 290 seats in the Majlis are reserved for religious minorities. Three of these seats are reserved for members of Christian religious groups, including **two seats for the country's Armenian Christians**, and one for Assyrian Christians.

...Government policy and practice contributed to severe restrictions on religious freedom. All non-Shi'a religious minorities suffer varying degrees of officially sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the areas of employment, education, and housing.

The Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (Ershad) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) monitor religious activity closely. Members of recognised religious

minorities are not required to register with the Government, and religion is not noted on national identity cards; however, their communal, religious, and cultural events and organizations, including schools, are monitored closely. Registration of Bahá'ís is a police function. The Government required evangelical Christian groups to compile and submit membership lists for their congregations.

The Government generally allowed recognized religious minorities to conduct religious education for their adherents in separate schools, although it restricted this right considerably in some cases. The Ministry of Education, which imposed certain curriculum requirements, supervised these schools. With few exceptions, the directors of such private schools must be Muslim. Attendance at the schools was not mandatory for recognized religious minorities. The Ministry of Education must approve all textbooks used in coursework, including religious texts. Recognized religious minorities could provide religious instruction in non-Persian languages, but such texts required approval by the authorities. This approval requirement sometimes imposed significant translation expenses on minority communities. However, Assyrian Christians reported that their community was permitted to write its own textbooks, which, following government authorization, were then printed at government expense and distributed to the Assyrian community.

...Reportedly, the President called for an end to the development of Christianity in the country. Christian groups outside the country reported the growth of underground churches in the country during the reporting period.

...Christians – particularly evangelicals – continued to be subject to harassment and close surveillance. During the reporting period, the Government vigilantly enforced its prohibition on proselytising by evangelical Christians by closely monitoring their activities, discouraging Muslims from entering church premises, closing their churches, and arresting Christian converts. Members of evangelical congregations are required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities. Worshipers are subject to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers. The Government restricted meetings for evangelical services to Sundays, and church officials are ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before admitting new members.

...The continuous presence of the country's pre-Islamic, non-Muslim communities, such as Zoroastrians, Jews, Sabeen-Mandaeans, and Christians, accustomed the population to the participation of non-Muslims in society; however, government actions continued to support elements of society who create a threatening atmosphere for some religious minorities. The President's new agenda stressed the importance of Islam in enhancing "national solidarity" and mandated that government-controlled media emphasise Islamic culture in order to "cause subcultures to adapt themselves to public culture." The Supreme Leader named March 2007 to March 2008 the year of "national unity and Islamic solidarity." Since President Ahmadi-Nejad took office in August 2005, conservative media have intensified a campaign against non-Muslim religious minorities, and political and religious leaders issued a continual stream of inflammatory statements. The campaigns against non-Muslims contributed to a significantly worse situation for non-Muslim society throughout the reporting period. Sunni Muslims and Christians encountered societal and religious discrimination and harassment at the local, provincial, and national levels (US Department of State 2007, *International Religious Freedom Report – Iran*, September 14 – Attachment 1).

4. Does the Armenian Orthodox Church proselytise in Iran?

There are several branches of the Armenian Church in Iran, of which the Armenian Orthodox (or Armenian Apostolic) Church is one. The others are the Armenian Catholic Church and the Armenian Evangelical Church which, as the name implies, is the branch of the Armenian

Church most given to proselytising in Iran. The previously mentioned report from *The Christian Century*, quoted in Question 3 above, states that “the Orthodox are not inclined to proselytise”, and the UK Home Office’s January 2008 *Country of Origin Information Report* for Iran states that “[t]he Government appears to be tolerant of groups such as Armenian Christians because they conduct their services in Armenian and thus do not proselytise” (for information on the Armenian Christian Churches, see: ‘Armenian Apostolic Church’ (undated), *Wikipedia* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_Apostolic_Church – Accessed 24 June 2008 – Attachment 16; ‘Armenian Catholic Church’ (undated), *Armeniapedia.org* http://www.armeniapedia.org/index.php?title=Armenian_Catholic_Church – Accessed 24 June 2008 – Attachment 17; ‘Armenian Evangelical Church’ (undated), *Wikipedia* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_Evangelical_Church – Accessed 24 June 2008 – Attachment 18¹; for the *Christian Century* report, see: Kauffman, R. 2008, ‘First person encounters – Inside Iran’, *The Christian Century*, 17 June – Attachment 15; for the UK Home Office report, see: UK Home Office 2008, *Country of Origin Information Report – Iran*, 31 January – Attachment 19).

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¹ **Users should be aware that Wikipedia is a Web-based free-content encyclopaedia which is written collaboratively by volunteers.** The Research Service recommends that users of Wikipedia familiarise themselves with the regulatory practices which Wikipedia employs as a preventative measure against vandalism, bias and inaccuracy.

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