Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note
Iran: Christians and Christian converts

Version 7.0

September 2022

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 Introduction section). It is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of a particular subject or theme.

It is split into 2 parts: (1) an 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 - that is information in the COI section; refugee/human rights laws and policies; and applicable caselaw - by describing this and its inter-relationships, and provides an assessment of, in general, whether one or more of the following applies**:**

- a person is reasonably likely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm
- that the general humanitarian situation is so severe that there are substantial grounds for believing that there is a real risk of serious harm because conditions amount to inhuman or degrading treatment as within paragraphs 339C and 339CA(iii) of the Immigration Rules / Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)
- that the security situation is such that there are substantial grounds for believing there is a real risk of serious harm because there exists a serious and individual threat to a civilian's life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence in a situation of international or internal armed conflict as within paragraphs 339C and 339CA(iv) of the Immigration Rules
- 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
- a claim is 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), 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. 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
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources.

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

The inclusion of a source is not, however, an endorsement of it or any view(s) expressed.

Each piece of information is referenced in a footnote. Full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the bibliography.

Feedback

Our goal is to provide accurate, reliable and up-to-date COI and clear guidance. We welcome feedback on how to improve our products. 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:

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London, SW1V 1PN
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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 on 14 September 2022

1. Introduction

1.1 Basis of claim

1.1.1 Fear of persecution and/or serious harm by the state because the person:

- is a Christian
- has converted to Christianity from Islam
- actively seeks to convert others to Christianity.

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1.2 Points to note

1.2.1 Though not all sources distinguish between these groups, Christians in this note generally comprise of:

- 'ethnic' Christians (Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans, the majority of whom are Orthodox or Catholic)
- 'non-ethnic' Christians, who are predominantly Persian (Farsi)-speaking Iranians who converted from Islam to Christianity prior to the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and up to around 2005 to 2006. They generally follow the Protestant faith, particularly Pentecostals, Presbyterians and Anglicans
- 'Christian converts', those who have converted from Islam since 2005 or 2006, who are not affiliated with registered convert churches, and may belong to the house church movement (see Religious demography and House churches).

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2. Consideration of issues

2.1 Credibility

2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the 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 In cases where there are doubts surrounding a person's claimed place of origin, decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing (see the Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis).

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2.2 Exclusion

2.2.1 Decision makers must consider whether there are serious reasons for considering 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 (which has a wider range of exclusions than refugee status).

2.2.3 For guidance on exclusion and restricted leave, see the Asylum Instruction on Exclusion under Articles 1F and 33(2) of the Refugee Convention, Humanitarian Protection and the instruction on Restricted Leave.

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2.3 Convention reason(s)

2.3.1 Actual or imputed religion.

2.3.2 Establishing a convention reason is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question is whether the person has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of an actual or imputed Refugee Convention reason.

2.3.3 For further guidance on the 5 Refugee Convention grounds see the Asylum Instruction, Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

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2.4 Risk

a. State treatment of 'ethnic' and 'non-ethnic' Christians

2.4.1 In general, 'ethnic' Christians are not at real risk of persecution or serious harm from the state. Similarly, 'non-ethnic' Christians (who converted prior to 1979 and up to around 2005 to 2006) are not at real risk of persecution or serious harm from the state.

2.4.2 While some 'ethnic' and 'non-ethnic' Christians face official discrimination, this is not likely to be sufficiently serious by its nature and/or repetition, or by an accumulation of various measures, to amount to persecution or serious harm. Each case must be considered on its own merits with the onus on the person to demonstrate a real risk from the state.

2.4.3 The Constitution recognises 'ethnic' Christians (Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans) and the government generally allows them to practice and teach their religion without interference, though some restrictions apply. Services in their churches cannot be held in Farsi (Persian), but only in their local language (see State treatment and attitudes – Towards 'ethnic' Christians).

2.4.4 All Christians and churches must be registered with the authorities and only recognised Christians can attend church and must not proselytise. Churches are monitored by security officials to ensure Christians of a Muslim background do not attend and those that do not comply with these restrictions have been closed down (see State treatment and attitudes – Towards 'ethnic' Christians and Towards Christian converts).

2.4.5 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

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b. State treatment of converts from Islam to Christianity (Christian converts)

2.4.6 In general, a person who is found to have converted to Christianity and who seeks to openly practice their faith in Iran, are likely to be subject to treatment or discrimination by the state that is sufficiently serious, by its nature or repetition, to amount to persecution. Each case must be considered on its own merits with the onus on the person to show that they would be at real risk of serious harm or persecution on account of their actual or perceived religion.

2.4.7 The country guidance case PS (Christianity – risk) Iran CG [2020] UKUT 00046 (IAC) heard 13 to 14 November 2019 and promulgated on 20 February 2020 (hereafter referred to as PS Iran), '… applies to protection claims from Iranians who claim to have converted from Islam to Christianity' (paragraph 141).

2.4.8 The Upper Tribunal (UT) in PS Iran held that 'Insofar as they relate to non-ethnic Christians, this decision replaces the country guidance decisions in FS and Others (Iran - Christian Converts) Iran CG [2004] UKIAT 00303 and SZ and JM (Christians - FS confirmed) Iran CG [2008] UKAIT 00082 which are no longer to be followed' (paragraph 142).

2.4.9 The UT in PS Iran agreed with the finding in SZ and JM, in that 'those who are perceived to be church leaders or activists face a real risk of harm' (paragraph 85).

2.4.10 In contrast to SZ and JM, which found that ordinary converts would not be at real risk of serious harm if returned to Iran, subject to other risk factors (paragraph 148), the UT in PS Iran held:

'We do not however find it safe to assume safe to assume that "ordinary" Christians, that is to say individuals with no role beyond attending collective worship at house churches, escape the attention of the authorities. On a general level the language used by the sources indicates that to the contrary, simply being a Christian is enough to get you arrested: "authorities continued to arrest members of unrecognized churches", "many arrests reportedly took place during police raids on religious gatherings", "Christians, particularly evangelicals and converts from Islam, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and detention" (paragraph 86).

2.4.11 Multiple sources, including Article 18, Open Doors, Middle East Concern and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, continue to report the arrest and detention of Christian converts – both leaders and organisers and 'ordinary' Christians. These arrests often, though not always, occur after house-church raids by the security forces (see House churches, Monitoring of, and raids on, house churches and Arrests and criminal charges).

2.4.12 The UT in PS Iran held that 'Decision makers should begin by determining whether the claimant has demonstrated [to the required standard of proof]

that he or she is a Christian. If that burden is discharged the following considerations apply:

'i) A convert to Christianity seeking to openly practice that faith in Iran would face a real risk of persecution.

'ii) If the claimant would in fact conceal his faith, decision-makers should consider why. If any part of the claimant's motivation is a fear of such persecution, the appeal should be allowed.

'iii) If the claimant would choose to conceal his faith purely for other reasons (family pressure, social constraints, personal preference etc) then protection should be refused. The evidence demonstrates that private and solitary worship, within the confines of the home, is possible and would not in general entail a real risk of persecution (paragraph 143).

2.4.13 In respect of 'written and oral evidence given by "church witnesses", in the reported case of MH (review; slip rule; church witnesses) Iran [2020] UKUT 125 (IAC), heard on 28 January 2020 and promulgated on 11 March 2020, the UT held that such material '… is potentially significant in cases of Christian conversion (see TF & MA v SSHD [2018] CSIH 58). Such evidence is not aptly characterised as expert evidence, nor is it necessarily deserving of particular weight, and the weight to be attached to such evidence is for the judicial fact-finder' (headnote iv).

2.4.14 The UT in PS Iran also held that:

'In cases where the claimant is found to be insincere in his or her claimed conversion, there is not a real risk of persecution "in-country". There being no reason for such an individual to associate himself with Christians, there is not a real risk that he would come to the adverse attention of the Iranian authorities. Decision-makers must nevertheless consider the possible risks arising at the "pinch point" of arrival:

'i) All returning failed asylum seekers are subject to questioning on arrival, and this will include questions about why they claimed asylum;

'ii) A returnee who divulges that he claimed to be a Christian is reasonably likely to be transferred for further questioning;

'iii) The returnee can be expected to sign an undertaking renouncing his claimed Christianity. The questioning will therefore in general be short and will not entail a real risk of ill-treatment;

'iv) If there are any reasons why the detention becomes prolonged, the risk of ill-treatment will correspondingly rise. Factors that could result in prolonged detention must be determined on a case by case basis. They could include but are not limited to:

'a) Previous adverse contact with the Iranian security services;

'b) Connection to persons of interest to the Iranian authorities;

'c) Attendance at a church with perceived connection to Iranian house churches;

'd) Overt social media content indicating that the individual concerned has actively promoted Christianity' (paragraph 144).

2.4.15 For more information and guidance relating to social media monitoring in general, see the Country Policy and Information Note on Iran: Social media, surveillance and sur place activities.

2.4.16 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status.

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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, in general, be able to obtain protection from the authorities.

2.5.2 For further guidance on assessing 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 or serious harm from the state, they are unlikely to be able to relocate to escape that risk.

2.6.2 For further guidance on considering internal relocation and factors to be taken into account 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

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3. Legal context

3.1 Religion

3.1.1 Iran is an Islamic republic and designates Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam as the official state religion, though other Muslim sects 'are to be accorded full respect…'[1] Christians are recognised in the Constitution as a religious minority (together with Judaism and Zoroastrianism) '… who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.'[2]

3.1.2 In regard to Christians, only 'ethnic' Christians (Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans) and those who 'can prove [that] they or their families were Christian before Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution' are recognised by the state[3] [4]. According to the US Department of State's 2021 Report on International Religious Freedom (USSD IRF Report 2021) Sabean-Mandaeans are also recognised as Christian, although they do not consider themselves as such[5].

See also Religious demography – Christians.

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3.2 Apostasy and proselytising

3.2.1 The USSD IRF Report 2021 stated that 'The law prohibits Muslims from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The only recognized conversions are from other religions to Islam. Sharia as interpreted by the government considers conversion from Islam apostasy, a crime punishable by death. Under the law, a child born to a Muslim father is Muslim.'[6]

3.2.2 The same source added 'The law does not recognize as Christian individuals who convert to Christianity. They may not register [with the authorities, unlike recognised religious minorities] and are not entitled to the same rights as recognized members of Christian communities.'[7]

3.2.3 In an August 2021 report on the situation of Christian converts, the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), an independent non-profit organization based in the USA that seeks to promote accountability and respect for human rights and the rule of law in Iran, noted that 'If a follower of an Abrahamic [Christianity or Judaism] religion becomes Muslim, that individual not only does not face any adverse consequences, but also will receive the legal protections not given to him or her previously. On the other

[1] Constitute, 'Iran (Islamic Republic of)'s Constitution' (Articles 1 and 12), 1979, revised 1989
[2] Constitute, 'Iran (Islamic Republic of)'s Constitution' (Article 13), 1979, revised 1989
[3] MRG, 'Iran – Christians', December 2017
[4] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section II), 2 June 2022
[5] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section II), 2 June 2022
[6] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section II), 2 June 2022
[7] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section II), 2 June 2022

hand, Muslims may be accused of apostasy if they change their religion from Islam and fail to repent.'[8]

3.2.4 Christian rights group, Middle East Concern (MEC), noted that 'Although apostasy is not proscribed by the Penal Code (a proposed amendment to the Code to criminalise apostasy was not adopted in 2013 amendments), the Code makes provision for judges to rely on authoritative Islamic sources in matters not covered by the Code – effectively providing scope for Islamic law sanctions to be applied for apostasy…'[9]

3.2.5 The IHRDC report noted that, while not proscribed by law, the penalties for apostasy '… have ranged from prison sentences to the death penalty.'[10] The same source noted that:

'In apostasy cases, courts have invoked Article 167 of the Constitution, which provides that if the judge cannot find codified laws as the basis for his judgment, he should deliver his ruling on the basis of authoritative Islamic sources and time-honored fatwas. Similarly, Article 220 of the Islamic Penal Code ("IPC") stipulates that where the law is silent, particularly when the hodud [plural for hadd] punishments have not been mentioned, courts should comply with Article 167 of the Constitution and apply authoritative Islamic sources. According to Article 15 of the IPC, hodud is a punishment whose details are determined by Shari'a law.'[11]

3.2.6 The IHRDC report noted that proselytising for Christianity was banned[12].

3.2.7 The USSD IRF Report 2021 stated that 'By law, non-Muslims may not engage in public persuasion or attempt to convert a Muslim to another faith or belief. The law considers these activities to be 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.'[13]

3.2.8 The USSD IRF Report 2021 cited penal code provisions in relation to apostasy and proselytising:

'The penal code specifies the death sentence for moharebeh ("enmity against God," which according to the Oxford Dictionary of Islam means in Quranic usage "corrupt conditions caused by unbelievers or unjust people that threaten social and political wellbeing"), fisad fil-arz ("corruption on earth," which includes apostasy or heresy), and sabb al-nabi ("insulting the Prophet" or "insulting the sanctities [Islam]"). According to the penal code, the application of the death penalty varies depending on the religion of both the perpetrator and the victim.'[14]

[8] IHRDC, 'Living in the Shadows of Oppression…' (1 Conversion to another religion), 12 August 2021
[9] MEC, 'Iran', no date
[10] IHRDC, 'Living in the Shadows of Oppression…' (2.1 Apostasy), 12 August 2021
[11] IHRDC, 'Living in the Shadows of Oppression…' (2.1 Apostasy), 12 August 2021
[12] IHRDC, 'Living in the Shadows of Oppression…' (Executive summary), 12 August 2021
[13] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section II), 2 June 2022
[14] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section II), 2 June 2022

3.2.9 In February 2021, Article 18, a London-based organisation that says aims to promote and protect religious freedom in Iran[15], referred to amendments signed into law that '... affect two articles of the Penal Code that are routinely used in the prosecution of converts: Articles 499 and 500.' The report cited the amendments:

'The new amendment to Article 499 provides for up to five years' imprisonment for "anyone who insults Iranian ethnicities or divine religions or Islamic schools of thought recognised under the Constitution with the intent to cause violence or tensions in the society or with the knowledge that such [consequences] will follow"…

'The amended version of Article 500 provides for up to five years' imprisonment for "any deviant educational or proselytising activity" by members of so-called "sects" that "contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam" through "mind-control methods and psychological indoctrination" or "making false claims or lying in religious and Islamic spheres, such as claiming divinity".'[16]

3.2.10 According to Open Doors International, an NGO supporting Christians worldwide, noted in its January 2022 report, based on a range of sources, that 'The [Penal Code] amendments widen the scope for prosecuting Christians, especially converts from Islam to Christianity, as the regime defines them as members of "sects" and "cults".'[17]

See also Convictions and prison sentences.

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3.3 Documentation

3.3.1 Both IranWire, 'a collaborative news website run by professional Iranian journalists in the diaspora and citizen journalists inside Iran'[18], and the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), 'an independent and nonpartisan not-for-profit organization that documents rights violations in Iran'[19], reported that a new rule on National Identity Cards, introduced in January 2020, only allows citizens to register as one of Iran's recognised religions. Anyone applying for a card, who is not Muslim, Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian, no longer has the option to tick 'other' in regard to religious affiliation. ID cards are required for access to government services and other transactions, including opening a bank account or applying for a driving license[20] [21].

3.3.2 According to Article 18, religious minorities, including Baha'is, Yarsan, Mandaeans and Christian converts, whose conversions are not recognised, will have to lie about their faith when applying for a card, or be denied citizenship rights[22].

[15] Article 18, 'Who we are', no date
[16] Article 18, 'Iran passes bill that threatens further repression of Christian…', 19 February 2021
[17] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (pages 5 and 13), January 2022
[18] IranWire, 'About', no date
[19] CHRI, 'Press Kit – Center for Human Rights in Iran', no date
[20] IranWire, 'Baha'is in Iran Denied ID Cards as Economic Persecution Continues', 8 January 2020
[21] CHRI, 'Unrecognized Minorities in Iran Must Now Hide Religion to Obtain…', 27 January 2020
[22] Article 18, 'Iran's ID-card policy turns unrecognised religious minorities into…', 28 January 2020

3.3.3 The Barnabas Fund, a Christian rights group, noted that 'Muslim-born converts to Christianity, who may have preferred not to make public their faith in order to avoid hostility or persecution from their family, employers or the authorities, now have to reveal they are Christian, or lie about their faith and tick the box that says Muslim.'[23]

3.3.4 According to a Barnabas Fund contact 'The holder's religion is not shown on the card, but information given on the application form is easily accessed by the state's computer network.'[24]

3.3.5 A response by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB), on the situation and treatment of Christians (2017 to February 2021), cited a Research Fellow from a university in Melbourne, whose research interests include religious identity in Iran, who said that, even when the 'other' category was in place, selecting it '… would usually indicate that the person was of an "undesirable" religion…'[25]

3.3.6 The CHRI noted that 'The new rule affects all new applicants, as cards already issued that have not expired will still be accepted, and anyone who has lost their card and needs a replacement.'[26]

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4. Religious demography

4.1 General

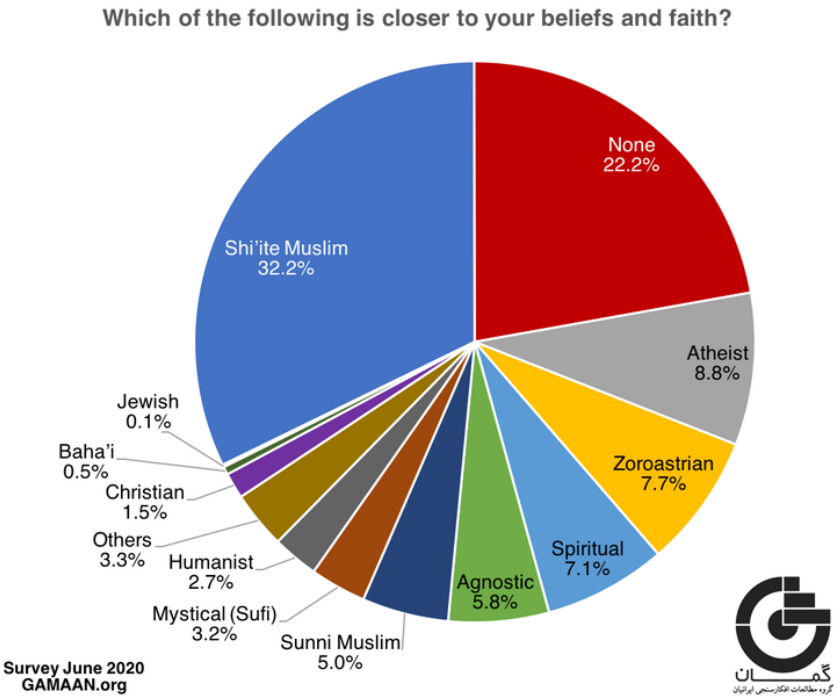
4.1.1 According to Iran's 2016 National Population and Housing Census, the total population was just over 79.9 million [estimated to be 86.7 million in 2022[27]], 99.6% of whom identified as Muslim, 0.3% identified as other religions, including Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian, and 0.2% were unspecified[28].

4.1.2 The USSD IRF Report 2021stated that 90% to 95% of the population was Shia, and 5% to 10% was Sunni[29].

4.1.3 In June 2020 the Netherlands-based research organisation, Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN (GAMAAN), conducted an online survey on Iranians' attitudes toward religion. The survey found that, of the nearly 40,000 respondents aged over 19 living in Iran, only around 40% identified as Muslim (approximately 32% Shia, 5% Sunni and 3% Sufi)[30].

4.1.4 The GAMAAN pie chart shown below depicts religious identity according to respondents of the survey[31]:

[23] Barnabas Fund, 'Iran forces Christian converts from Islam to declare their…', 24 February 2020
[24] Barnabas Fund, 'Iran forces Christian converts from Islam to declare their…', 24 February 2020
[25] IRB, 'Iran: Situation and treatment of Christians by society and the authorities…', 9 March 2021
[26] CHRI, 'Unrecognized Minorities in Iran Must Now Hide Religion to Obtain…', 27 January 2020
[27] CIA, 'The World Factbook – Iran' (People and society), last updated 21 July 2022
[28] Statistical Centre of Iran, 'Selected Findings of the 2016 National…' (pages 20 to 21), August 2018
[29] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section I), 2 June 2022
[30] GAMAAN, 'Iranians' Attitudes Toward Religion: A 2020 Survey Report' (page 6), 25 August 2020
[31] GAMAAN, 'Iranians' Attitudes Toward Religion: A 2020 Survey Report' (page 6), 25 August 2020



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4.2 'Ethnic' Christians

4.2.1 Minority Rights Group International (MRG) categorised Iranian Christians into 2 groups: 'ethnic' Christians, which it defined as Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans [Assyro-Chaldeans, Chaldo-Assyrians[32]] who constituted over 90% of Iran's [recognised] Christian population, and 'non-ethnic' Christians, comprised of Protestants and Evangelicals[33].

4.2.2 'Ethnic' Christians pre-date Islam in Iran[34] [35] and, according to a 2017 Landinfo (Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre) report, based on a range of sources, '… belong to old church communities based on common ethnicity and language, such as the Apostolic Church of Armenia and the Assyrian Church of the East'[36]. Others, according to Open Doors, belong to '… the Armenian Catholic Church and the (Assyrian) Chaldean Catholic Church (both belonging to the wider Roman Catholic Church). An even smaller number have become Protestant, belonging to a number of denominations including the Assemblies of God, the Assyrian Pentecostal Church, the Assyrian Evangelical Church, the Armenian Evangelical Church and the Anglican Church, among others.'[37].

4.2.3 Protestant 'non-ethnic' church communities, where many members were converts from Islam, can mostly be attributed to missionary activities that took place between 1925 and 1979[38]. (See Christian converts)

[32] IRB, 'Iran: Situation and treatment of Christians by society and the authorities…', 9 March 2021
[33] MRG, 'Iran – Christians', December 2017
[34] MRG, 'Iran – Christians', December 2017
[35] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section II), 2 June 2022
[36] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (page 7), 27 November 2017
[37] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 25), January 2022
[38] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (page 7), 27 November 2017

4.2.4 A 2018 report by MRG, Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and Centre for Supporters of Human Rights (CSHR) noted that Armenians were the largest Christian group, and that the cities of Tehran and Isfahan were home to 'substantial' Christian populations[39]. According to the IRB response (2017 to February 2021), based on various sources, Urmia, Hamedan, Abadan as well as other cities, also had Christian populations[40].

4.2.5 A report published in January 2022, covering 2021 events, by Christian rights groups Article 18, Open Doors, Middle East Concern and Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) noted that 'According to the government, the Christian community in Iran is restricted to ethnic Armenians and Assyrians and a small expatriate community.'[41]

4.2.6 The USSD IRF Report 2021 stated:

'… the government only recognizes the Christianity of citizens who are Armenian or Assyrian Christians, because 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 they state they do not consider themselves as such… The government does not recognize evangelical Protestants as Christian.'[42]

4.2.7 According to the IHRDC report, 'The majority of 'ethnic' Christians follow the Orthodox or Catholic denominations…'[43]

4.2.8 The Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), noted in its April 2020 report on Iran, based on a range of sources, that 'ethnic churches have different denominations – there are Assyrian Catholic, Orthodox and Presbyterian congregations…' and that they 'are required to deliver sermons in their traditional language.'[44] The holding of services in Persian is prohibited in Armenian and Assyrian churches[45].

4.2.9 According to the same report, 'There are approximately 20 officially recognised Christian churches in Iran.'[46]

4.2.10 The USSD IRF Report 2021 noted that Christians were among the 3 largest non-Muslim minorities, alongside Baha'is and Yarsanis.'[47]

4.2.11 The 2016 Iran census identified 130,158 Christians[48], which, according to UN data, comprised of 69,075 males and 61,083 females. The UN data also noted that the majority of Christians lived in urban areas[49]. This figure of approximately 130,000 is consistent with the estimated population of

[39] MRG and others, 'Rights Denied: Violations against ethnic and…' (page 10), 13 March 2018
[40] IRB, 'Iran: Situation and treatment of Christians by society and the authorities…', 9 March 2021
[41] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2021' (page 5), January 2022
[42] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section II), 2 June 2022
[43] IHRDC, 'Living in the Shadows of Oppression…' (Introduction), 12 August 2021
[44] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iran' (paragraph 3.37), April 2020
[45] CSW, 'Letter to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights…', 10 November 2021
[46] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iran' (paragraph 3.37), April 2020
[47] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section I), 2 June 2022
[48] Statistical Centre of Iran, 'Selected Findings of the 2016 National…' (page 20), August 2018
[49] UN Data, 'Statistics' (Iran), 2016

Armenians (60,000 to 80,000 according to the Armenian government[50]) and Assyrians (50,000 according to the Assyrian Policy Institute[51]) living in Iran.

4.2.12 Other sources provided different figures on the Christian population, as noted by the following examples.

4.2.13 In a letter to the Iranian government on the human rights situation of Christians in Iran, dated November 2020, UN Special Rapporteurs estimated that there were 250,000 ethnic Assyrian and Armenian Christians in Iran[52]. Citing a source dated 2018, Open Doors noted that '.. the Armenian community probably declined from 250,000 at its peak before the Revolution to around 30 - 35,000 today.'[53]

4.2.14 Special Rapporteurs estimated the total number of Christians to be between 500,000 and 800,000[54]. The USSD IRF Report 2021 said that 'According to Boston University's 2020 World Religion Database, there are approximately 579,000 Christians…'[55] Whilst Open Doors stated there were approximately 800,000 Christians, 0.9% of the Iran's total population[56]. Some estimates put the figure at over 1 million[57] [58].

4.2.15 Not all sources differentiated between 'ethnic' Christians and converts, though the UN indicated that the majority of Christians in Iran were converts from Islam[59].

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4.3 Christian converts

4.3.1 It was Landinfo's view, based on a range of sources, that converts in Iran could be roughly divided into 2 groups, depending on when they converted. Citing various sources, the report noted:

'The first group includes those who converted as a result of Western missionary activities before the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, their descendants and a relatively small number of new converts until around 2005-2006. These converts have been affiliated with registered convert churches whose congregations consisted mostly of people with Persian and Muslim backgrounds, but also people with Assyrian, Armenian, Kurdish or other ethnic backgrounds. The largest and most renowned are the Assembly of God churches, which were Pentecostal branches affiliated with the American Pentecostal Movement. In addition, there were Presbyterian and Anglican churches who also did missionary work and baptised Muslims. Under certain conditions, these churches were allowed to

[50] Armenian Gov, Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, 'Diaspora - Iran', no date
[51] Assyrian Policy Institute, 'Iran', no date
[52] OHCHR, 'Iran (Islamic Republic of) IRN 26/2020', 11 November 2020
[53] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 25), January 2022
[54] OHCHR, 'Iran (Islamic Republic of) IRN 26/2020', 11 November 2020
[55] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section I), 2 June 2022
[56] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (pages 5 and 13), January 2022
[57] Elam, 'Iran's story – The story of Iran's church', no date
[58] Article 18, 'Survey supports claims of 1 million Christian converts in Iran', 27 August 2020
[59] OHCHR, 'Iran (Islamic Republic of) IRN 26/2020', 11 November 2020

continue operations after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and until around 2013…'[60]

4.3.2 Sources indicated the continued existence of what Landinfo described as 'convert churches' which 'hold religious services in Persian and also use Persian-language Bibles'[61] [62]. The Diocese of Iran included the Anglican churches of St. Luke's church and St. Paul's Church in Isfahan, St. Simon the Zealot's Church in Shiraz, and St. Paul's Church in Tehran, though they were without a bishop[63] [64]. CSW and other Christian organisations noted in November 2021 that these churches were '… kept under tight surveillance by the authorities' and they were 'not allowed to accept visitors or take on any new members.'[65]

4.3.3 Open Doors reported in January 2022 that 'Only four Protestant Persian-speaking congregations remain in the country. These congregations are prohibited from accepting converts from Islam to Christianity, are not allowed to accept visitors nor can they take on any new members. All other Persian-speaking churches – both Catholic and Protestant – have been forcibly closed down in recent years.'[66]

4.3.4 Landinfo described the second and largest group of converts as those who:

'… have converted after 2005-2006, as a result of Christian missionary activities aimed at the population of Iran from abroad… This missionary work is done via satellite TV, by using the Internet and social media, as well as by spreading Bibles in Persian. Several sources also state that missionary activities towards Muslims occur within the country, despite the government's repressive measures. Some of those who preach the Christian gospel in Iran have received training and been baptised abroad…'[67]

4.3.5 The same report noted that 'The absolute majority of these newer converts have probably not had any contact with the registered convert churches, but belong to the house church movement.'[68] (see House churches)

4.3.6 According to the 2020 GAMAAN survey results, there were 'A significant number of converts to Christianity…'[69], though the survey reports the proportion of converts within the sample, but not the numbers. Information about the sample is available on pages 3 and 4 of the report[70].

4.3.7 An undated report by Elam Ministries, a Christian organisation who states its mission is to '… strengthen and expand the church in the Iran region and beyond'[71], noted that '… more Iranians have become Christians in the last 20 years than in the previous 13 centuries put together since Islam came to

[60] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (page 7), 27 November 2017
[61] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (pages 9 to 10), 27 November 2017
[62] CSW, 'Letter to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights…', 10 November 2021
[63] IHRDC, 'Living in the Shadows of Oppression…' (Introduction), 12 August 2021
[64] JMECA, 'Iran', no date
[65] CSW, 'Letter to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights…', 10 November 2021
[66] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 36), January 2022
[67] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (page 7), 27 November 2017
[68] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (page 8), 27 November 2017
[69] GAMAAN, 'Iranians' Attitudes Toward Religion: A 2020 Survey Report' (page 7), 25 August 2020
[70] GAMAAN, 'Iranians' Attitudes Toward Religion: A 2020 Survey…' (pages 3 and 4), 25 August 2020
[71] Elam, 'What we do – Our mission', no date

Iran. In 1979, there were an estimated 500 Christians from a Muslim background in Iran. Today, there are hundreds of thousands – some say more than 1 million.'[72]

4.3.8 Referring to the 1.5% of the nearly 40,000 respondents that identified as Christian in the 2020 GAMAAN survey[73], Article 18 noted that 'If this figure is extrapolated across Iran's over 80 million people… this would suggest an additional one million converts to Christianity.'[74]

4.3.9 Open Doors stated in a January 2022 report that 'Converts with a Muslim background constitute the largest group of Christians in the country and there are also many Iranians abroad who convert to Christianity.'[75]

4.3.10 According to author Mark Bradley, cited in a 2017 report by Landinfo (Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre) on Christian converts, 70% of leaders in the house church community were women (Mark Bradley, 2014)[76]. A 2017 report by Open Doors, cited by Landinfo, stated that women 'played a key role in the house church movement' and practised as leaders, preachers and Sunday school teachers[77]. In its January 2022 report, Open Doors reiterated that the majority of house church members were women[78].

4.3.11 The 2017 Landinfo report noted that 'Most converts in Iran are Protestants, more specifically Pentecostals, Presbyterians and Anglicans. Reports of conversions to other branches of Christianity are rare… Converts have different ethnic backgrounds and thus reflect the multi-ethnic and multicultural Iranian population.'[79]

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5. House churches

5.1 Evolution and organisation

5.1.1 The IRB response (2017 to February 2021) stated that 'Sources indicate that house churches in Iran have spread because of church closures…, a lack of state licenses to build new churches… or because access to official churches has been restricted to Armenian and Assyrian Christians…'[80]

5.1.2 Citing numerous sources, the 2017 Landinfo report noted that, 'A house church is established when converts gather in private homes to get education in Christianity, read the Bible, pray and sing together and watch sermons on TV programmes in Persian via Christian satellite channels from abroad. As mentioned, YouTube and Skype are also used for preaching and

[72] Elam, 'Iran's story – The story of Iran's church', no date
[73] GAMAAN, 'Iranians' Attitudes Toward Religion: A 2020 Survey Report' (page 6), 25 August 2020
[74] Article 18, 'Survey supports claims of 1 million Christian converts in Iran', 27 August 2020
[75] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 14), January 2022
[76] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (page 20), 27 November 2017
[77] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (page 20), 27 November 2017
[78] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 41), January 2022
[79] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (page 7), 27 November 2017
[80] IRB, 'Iran: Situation and treatment of Christians by society and the authorities…', 9 March 2021

teaching. Members of house churches also obtain religious materials from media such as Telegram, Instagram and WhatsApp...'[81]

5.1.3 Open Doors noted that 'Since virtually all Persian-language church services are prohibited and only some ageing communities remain, most converts gather in informal house-church meetings or receive information on the Christian faith via satellite TV and websites.'[82]

5.1.4 Sources cited in Landinfo's 2017 report indicated that most converts were introduced to Christianity, and thus house churches, by family and friends, whilst others were introduced to the faith via Christian programs on satellite tv[83].

5.1.5 The same report noted that some house churches '… are independent, or part of a local network without contact with organisations abroad. Others have an informal connection to churches abroad, or they are part of a more extensive network run by Iranian Christian organisations abroad, such as Elam Ministries and Pars Theological Center…'[84]

5.1.6 The 2017 Landinfo report further noted that 'There are also theological differences between house churches. Some do not believe in the Trinity and baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and thus have a different understanding of Jesus than traditional Christianity... The Church of Iran, which is probably Iran's largest network of house churches, is referred to in English-language sources as non-Trinitarian.'[85]

5.1.7 Independent Irish charity, Church In Chains, which 'raises awareness of the plight of persecuted Christians'[86], described non-Trinitarian churches as "Jesus Only" or "Oneness" churches[87].

5.1.8 In an article dated 1 March 2022, Iranian Christian News Agency, Mohabat News, referred to The Church of Iran as a cult who '… reject the doctrine of Trinity and baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. They have no relation or any connections with the mainstream Christian churches in Iran.' According to the article, The Church of Iran follow the teachings of American Evangelist, William Branham[88].

5.1.9 The DFAT report noted that:

'House churches vary in size, style and structure. Most are small and informal, and consist of close family and friends gathering on a regular or semi-regular basis to pray, worship, read the Bible and/or watch Christian television programs broadcast via satellite or discs smuggled from abroad (including in Farsi). Other house churches may be larger, and may grow organically as members share their faith with family and friends. While some groups do not have any formal links with other Christian groups, others are part of house church networks within a particular city or area. Some house

[81] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (page 11), 27 November 2017
[82] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 14), January 2022
[83] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (pages 12 to 13), 27 November 2017
[84] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (page 11), 27 November 2017
[85] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1)…' (page 12), 27 November 2017
[86] Church In Chains, 'What we do', no date
[87] Church In Chains, 'Church of Iran', 6 January 2022
[88] Mohabat News, 'Temporary release of a group of non-Trinitarian Christian…', 1 March 2022

church leaders are trained in Christian theology (either online, via Christian satellite television or through residential courses completed outside Iran). A growing number of house churches have "Internet pastors", where a foreign-based preacher leads the church and provides instruction remotely via the Internet.'[89]

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5.2 Number and location

5.2.1 A joint report by the Danish Immigration Service and the Danish Refugee Council, dated February 2018 (2018 DIS-DRC report), based on interviews conducted in September and October 2017 in Iran, Turkey and the United Kingdom, noted that, according to a 'Western Embassy' in Tehran, '… house churches are quite common in Iran and their numbers are growing.'[90]

5.2.2 Writing about house churches in Iran, David Yeghnazar, Executive Director of Elam Ministries, stated in an undated report that 'Though government security agents work hard to crack down on these outlawed house churches, there are so many – and new ones are formed so regularly – that it's impossible to find them all… I know of hundreds of new house churches that have been planted [established] through satellite television, social media, and follow-up ministry.'[91]

5.2.3 The January 2022 Open Doors report indicated that there were 'thousands of unconnected house churches…'[92]

5.2.4 An undated article by Global Opportunities for Christ, a missionary group based in the US, reported on the House Church Network in Iran, a project described as an 'underground network of house churches… ' and supported by Global Catalytic Ministries (GCM)[93]. According to its website, the GCM 'exists to transform Muslims worldwide through Jesus Christ by means of disciple making, church planting, and leadership development.'[94] The Global Opportunities for Christ article noted that 'GCM's house church network inside Iran consists of close to 500 house churches, many of them small, with close to 5,000 believers, in a total of over 100 different cities.'[95]

5.2.5 According to Church In Chains, non-Trinitarian The Church of Iran '… is based in Rasht in northern Iran but has followers in Karaj, Shiraz and Isfahan…'[96]

5.2.6 The DFAT report noted 'According to international observers, house churches exist across Iran, particularly in major cities.' It was DFAT's understanding that house churches were '… situated in more affluent and liberal parts of major cities (including north Tehran)' and that '… house church congregants regularly change houses to avoid detection.'[97]

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[89] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iran' (paragraph 3.51), April 2020
[90] DIS-DRC, 'Iran: House Churches and Converts' (page 20), 23 February 2018
[91] Elam Ministries, 'Iran's Story' (How persecution in Iran has backfired), no date
[92] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 25), January 2022
[93] Global Opportunities for Christ, 'House Church Network in Iran', no date
[94] GCM, 'About - GCM', no date
[95] Global Opportunities for Christ, 'House Church Network in Iran', no date
[96] Church In Chains, 'Church of Iran', 6 January 2022
[97] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iran' (paragraph 3.51), April 2020

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6. State treatment and attitudes

6.1 Towards 'ethnic' Christians

6.1.1 The IRB response (2017 to February 2021) noted that:

'MRG indicates that Armenians "insist on their good relations with the Iranian government," and provides the example of an Armenian Christian Member of Parliament in Iran who has reportedly claimed that religious minorities face "less" difficulty in Iran than they do in Europe…. The Research Fellow stated that Armenian and Assyrian Christians do not face barriers in practicing and teaching their faith… The same source also stated that, even though they are not a recognized religious minority, "Christians of non-Iranian origin living in Iran, sometimes for several generations (mostly Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox and various Protestant sects)" are not subject to "much interference" from the authorities… However, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) indicated that "the protections enshrined in article 13 [of the constitution] are not enforced or carried out in practice"...'[98]

6.1.2 According to the April 2020 DFAT report:

'The activities of recognised Christian communities are closely regulated, to guard against proselytisation. All Christians and Christian churches must be registered with the authorities, and only recognised Christians can attend church. Security officials closely monitor registered churches to verify that services are not conducted in Farsi, and perform regular 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.'[99]

6.1.3 The same report noted that:

'The Penal Code strictly prohibits proselytisation by religious minority groups – it is a capital crime for non-Muslims to convert Muslims. Against this background, the three recognised minority religions do not proselytise or accept converts. Strict instructions not to minister to Iranians apply to all recognised churches, including the small number of Latin Catholic and Protestant churches in Tehran and elsewhere that cater to expatriates. To enforce this prohibition, authorities closely monitor recognised churches… DFAT understands that recognised churches regularly receive telephone enquiries from individuals falsely claiming to be interested in converting, as a way of testing their adherence to the prohibition on converts.'[100]

6.1.4 Open Doors noted in its January 2022 report that 'Many (if not all) public church services are monitored by the secret police. Armenians and Assyrians, while under surveillance, have not been hindered from gathering,

[98] IRB, 'Iran: Situation and treatment of Christians by society and the authorities…', 9 March 2021
[99] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iran' (paragraph 3.38), April 2020
[100] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iran' (paragraph 3.49), April 2020

as long as they conduct their services in their own languages and do not welcome Muslim-background Christians to their meetings and activities.'[101]

6.1.5 The DFAT report noted that:

'Despite these restrictions, community leaders associated with recognised churches report that the authorities respect their religious rights, and their communities are able to act freely in their own spaces without government interference (including holding mixed-gender gatherings, using alcohol for ceremonial purposes and allowing women to uncover their heads). A local Christian from Tehran told DFAT they experienced no official or societal discrimination, and felt comfortable practising their faith.'[102]

6.1.6 Open Doors noted in its report dated January 2022 that, although 'ethnic' Christians had constitutional rights, they still faced discrimination. According to the report:

'They are not allowed to hold services in Persian (Farsi) or print religious materials in Persian. In addition, they face employment restrictions (being Muslim is a requirement for many jobs, in particular in government positions and the authorities have been known to force Muslim employers to dismiss Christian employees); marriage restrictions (for instance, the Civil Code prohibits a non-Muslim man from marrying a Muslim woman); unequal treatment by the courts; not being allowed to adopt [Muslim] children [from state-run orphanages[103]]; the Islamic hijab is compulsory for all women in Iran, including Christians; and the inability to inherit property from a Muslim (which encourages people to convert to Islam for financial reasons). Moreover, Article 881 of the Iranian Civil Code provides that when an "infidel" dies, if there is any Muslim among the beneficiaries, this legatee inherits all the property even if only a distant relative. Even the recognized religious minorities are referred to as "infidels" in this article. Christians are also not allowed to hold public offices such as being a judge, qualify for the presidency or be elected to local councils (except for three out of five designated seats for religious minorities in the Majlis, the Iranian parliament).

'The government forces recognized churches to reject any Muslim trying to be baptized into the Christian faith and requires a church to register its members. The government closes any church that does not comply. For this reason, converts are forced to meet in informal house churches or to practice their faith in isolation.'[104]

See also Employment.

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6.2 Towards Christian converts

6.2.1 In January 2021, the Iranian government provided an official response to the November 2020 letter from UN Special Rapporteurs, which had highlighted the 'reported persecution of members of the Christian minority in Iran,

[101] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 36), January 2022
[102] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iran' (paragraph 3.39), April 2020
[103] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 33), January 2022
[104] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (pages 11 to 12), January 2022

including converts from Islam…'[105] The Iranian government described the converts as 'under cover of promoting Christianity', who were 'communicating with evangelical Zionism' and 'holding illegal and secret meetings to deceive citizens...'[106] The response also said that legal action would be taken against 'private [house] churches' in cases of 'illegal activity for anti-security purposes of Zionist Christian cult.'[107]

6.2.2 According to Open Doors, the government sees converts as '… an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran.'[108] The same report noted that 'If a convert's new faith becomes known, they are very likely to lose their employment. Government officials in particular will put them under pressure to renounce their faith, as will wider society (but to a lesser extent).'[109]

6.2.3 A July 2022 report published by the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), authored by Shahin Milani, Executive Director of the IHRDC, reported on religious propaganda in Iran, noted:

'Propaganda against Christian converts is often disguised as anti-Zionism, and Christian converts are regularly referred to as members of a "Zionist" network. The reference to Zionism in this context does not refer to specific allegations of links between Christian converts in Iran and the state of Israel. Instead, it should be understood as describing a broad conspiracy in which evangelical Christians across the world promote political viewpoints that serve Zionist ideology.'[110]

6.2.4 The USCIRF report gave examples of such propaganda, citing a January 2021 article by Fars News, 'believed to be run by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)'[111], which reported that '… members of a "Zionist network" across several provinces were arrested. The report added that the purpose of the network was "creating moral depravity" and "promoting religious conversion." The final line of the report mentioned that in the previous two years, "networks connected to the Christian movement" have engaged in "widespread security efforts" in the country.'[112]

6.2.5 The USCIRF also reported 'In an interview with a website dedicated to exposing religious movements and cults, Hojjat al-Islam Kashani, a cleric who serves as the secretary of the Islam-Christianity Dialog Association, stated, "What is being promoted today as Christianity is not traditional Christianity, but rather it is evangelical and colonial Christianity. In reality evangelical Christianity is not a religion. It is a policy oriented towards colonialism".'[113]

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[105] OHCHR, 'Iran (Islamic Republic of) IRN 26/2020', 11 November 2020
[106] OHCHR, 'Iran (Islamic Republic of) IRN 26/2020 – Replies received' (para iii), 12 January 2021
[107] OHCHR, 'Iran (Islamic Republic of) IRN 26/2020 – Replies received' (para x), 12 January 2021
[108] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 6), January 2022
[109] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 13), January 2022
[110] USCIRF, 'Religious Propaganda in Iran' (page 8), 22 July 2022
[111] USCIRF, 'Religious Propaganda in Iran' (page 4), 22 July 2022
[112] USCIRF, 'Religious Propaganda in Iran' (page 8), 22 July 2022
[113] USCIRF, 'Religious Propaganda in Iran' (page 8), 22 July 2022

6.3 Monitoring of, and raids on, house churches

6.3.1 As noted in the 2018 DIS-DRC report, a 'Western Embassy' in Tehran stated that 'The fact that house churches exist, means they have space to operate. It is however very important to keep these activities under the radar as house churches are illegal in Iran.'[114]

6.3.2 The 2018 DIS-DRC report cited a number of sources, who indicated 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.'[115]

6.3.3 The April 2020 DFAT report stated that, according to local sources, '… the authorities do not actively look for house churches. Rather, raids – where they occur – are usually the result of tip-offs by Muslim neighbours.'[116]

6.3.4 The joint 2020 report by Article 18 and others noted that house churches were 'regularly targeted by the security services.'[117] According to the same report, 'In 2020 there were regular reports of house-churches being raided. Security raids on house-churches took place in cities of Kerman, Karaj, Tehran, Malayer, Gonbad, Khark, Rask, and Arak, though the majority were not publicly reported.'[118]

6.3.5 According to the IHRDC, 'The security forces usually raid house churches without showing any search or arrest warrant.'[119]

6.3.6 The April 2020 DFAT report stated that:

'Authorities interpret the growth in house churches as a threat to national security and periodically carry out raids against them. Raids focus particularly on house churches that actively proselytise or seek out new members. DFAT is unable to verify if the frequency of raids of house

[114] DIS-DRC, 'Iran: House Churches and Converts' (page 20), 23 February 2018
[115] DIS-DRC, 'Iran: House Churches and Converts' (page 5), 23 February 2018
[116] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iran' (paragraph 3.52), April 2020
[117] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2020' (page 16), February 2021
[118] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2020' (page 16), February 2021
[119] IHRDC, 'Living in the Shadows of Oppression…' (10.2 Arbitrary arrest…), 12 August 2021

churches is increasing or whether a warrant is required to execute a raid. Local sources were unaware of any raids in the first half of 2019, although raids may not necessarily be publicised…'[120]

6.3.7 According to CSW, 'Any gathering of Christians, including social gatherings such as birthday or engagement parties, is treated as potential house church activity, and is subject to raids.'[121]

6.3.8 A CHRI representative told the IRB in February 2021 that '… house churches "are promptly shut down by Iran's security establishment," and shutdowns are "often" followed by arrests…'[122]

6.3.9 According to a joint report published in February 2021, covering 2020 events, by Article 18 and other Christian rights groups (hereby referred to as the joint 2020 report by Article 18 and others), 'Iran's Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) actively tries to infiltrate these house-churches through government agents or informants.'[123]

6.3.10 Open Doors noted in its January 2022 report that 'Government control is highest in urban areas, while rural areas are less monitored. However, the anonymity of urban areas gives Christians more freedom to organize meetings and activities than in rural areas, in which social control is higher.'[124]

See also Arrests and criminal charges.

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6.4 Social media monitoring

6.4.1 The 2018 DIS-DRC report noted that:

'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. Furthermore, the authorities are more alerted to activities threatening the established system.'[125]

6.4.2 According to the joint 2020 report by Article 18 and others 'The state also monitors the communication between Iranian citizens and international Christian media broadcasts. Christian media organisations have reported that the Iranian government tries to infiltrate them and identify enquirers. According to the president of Heart4Iran Ministries, Mike Ansari, an estimated 20% of enquiries they receive are from intelligence agents.'[126]

[120] DFAT, 'Country Information Report Iran' (paragraph 3.52), April 2020
[121] CSW, 'General briefing: Iran', 1 May 2020
[122] IRB, 'Iran: Situation and treatment of Christians by society and the authorities…', 9 March 2021
[123] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2020' (page 8), February 2021
[124] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 30), January 2022
[125] DIS-DRC, 'Iran: House Churches and Converts' (page 6), 23 February 2018
[126] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2020' (page 8), February 2021

6.4.3 A December 2021 joint report, based on a range of sources, by Landinfo, the Belgian Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) and the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM), which described the system of criminal procedures in Iran, noted that '… people advocating for Christianity on social media… is considered a matter of national security.'[127]

6.4.4 Open Doors noted in its January 2022 report that: 'Security services in Iran monitor social media for Christian-related texts and record such posts as evidence prior to an arrest. Christians have been confronted with private messages and posts during interrogation. Although this mostly concerns converts, there is also a risk for other types of Christians, as sharing Christian messages can be interpreted as acts of proselytization, especially when written in Persian.'[128]

6.4.5 The same report noted 'Due to the high surveillance of all media, accessing Christian materials comes at a risk. The authorities monitor Christian broadcasts and Internet presence and use them to discover and track converts.'[129]

6.4.6 For more information on social media monitoring in general, see the Country Policy and Information Note on Iran: Social media, surveillance and sur place activities.

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6.5 Arrests and criminal charges

6.5.1 According to the 2018 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 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

[127] Landinfo and others, 'Iran: Criminal procedures and documents' (page 24), December 2021
[128] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 32), January 2022
[129] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 32), January 2022

will receive his charge within 24 hours and come to court within ten days, a source mentioned.'[130]

6.5.2 Open Doors noted in its January 2022 report that both Christian convert group leaders and regular members were arrested, charged and given lengthy prison terms[131]. The report added that 'In the past, especially the leaders of Christian convert groups were prosecuted; but since 2014 an increasing number of non-leaders have received similar charges and long prison terms for crimes against national security.'[132] The report added 'Those arrested are subjected to intensive and often aggressive interrogation.'[133]

6.5.3 The USSD IRF Report 2021 noted that:

'Non-Armenian Christians, particularly evangelicals and other converts from Islam, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and detentions and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to Christian NGOs. Human rights organizations and Christian NGOs continued to report authorities arrested Christians, including members of unrecognized churches, for their religious affiliation or activities, and charged them with operating illegally in private homes or supporting and accepting assistance from "enemy" countries. Many arrests reportedly took place during police raids on religious gatherings and included confiscation of religious property. News reports stated authorities subjected arrested Christians to severe physical and psychological mistreatment, which at times included beatings and solitary confinement.'[134]

See Treatment of detainees.

6.5.4 According to sources cited in the 2018 DIS-DRC report 'A conversion and an anonymous life as a converted Christian in itself do not lead to an arrest, but if the conversion is followed up by other activities as for instance proselytising and training others, the case differs; the same applies if family members report the convert to the authorities.'[135]

6.5.5 The joint 2020 report by Article 18 and others stated that Christians who were arrested '… typically face charges relating to "national security".' The report cited the charges brought against Christians in 2020, which included: '"propaganda against the regime", "action against national security", "spreading 'Zionist' Christianity", "acting against national security by promoting 'Zionist' Christianity", and "acting against national security through participation in establishing evangelistic "Zionist" house churches.'[136]

6.5.6 CSW and other Christian organisations stated in November 2021 that '… the Iranian regime views membership of a house-church as an "action against national security", punishable by up to five years in prison. The establishment or directing of these house-churches - also considered a

[130] DIS-DRC, 'Iran: House Churches and Converts' (page 7), 23 February 2018
[131] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 6), January 2022
[132] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (pages 30 to 31), January 2022
[133] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 14), January 2022
[134] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section II), 2 June 2022
[135] DIS-DRC, 'Iran: House Churches and Converts' (page 7), 23 February 2018
[136] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2020' (page 11), February 2021

"national security" offence - carries a penalty of up to ten years' imprisonment.'[137]

6.5.7 The same source stated that 115 Christians were arrested in 2020[138]. According to that report:

'In 2020, 52 Iranian Christians were publicly reported to have been arrested with regards to their Christian identity and/or activity, while at least a further 63 went unreported.

'Arresting officials are usually from the MOIS [Ministry of Intelligence], Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC], or the police. Those responsible for arrests are legally obliged to produce a warrant, but frequently fail to do so. Sometimes Christians are summoned to security offices and arrested there, but arrests are often made during raids on house-churches.'[139]

6.5.8 The joint 2021 report by Article 18 and others, published in January 2022 and covering 2021 events, noted that there were 59 arrests of Christians in 2021, and 38 publicly recorded cases of arrests of Christians or raids on their homes or house churches[140]. The same source stated that 'only a fraction' of cases were publicly reported[141]. According to the IHRDC, the number of raids increased during Christian holidays[142].

6.5.9 According to Open Doors, the number of Christians arrested decreased in 2021 (49 arrests) compared to 2020 (110 arrests). The report noted that:

'There was no wave of widespread arrests, although smaller crackdowns took place during the reporting period. The fall in the number of arrests is probably because the COVID-19 pandemic measures significantly decreased the number of Christian activities, hence creating less opportunities to arrest Christians. The COVID-19 crisis probably also occupied the government in other ways, while the Iranian security services had their hands full with silencing and dealing with the protests and strikes that started in July 2021.'[143]

6.5.10 The same source stated that:

'Converts and other Christians, especially those suspected of evangelism, are frequently summoned for interrogation or are interrogated upon arrest. Some of them have been summoned dozens of times. The aim of the interrogation in these cases is to intimidate the Christians without the bother of having to prosecute and imprison them. However, some of them are imprisoned and prosecuted after these interrogations, depending on the severity of the allegations and the available "evidence".'[144]

[137] CSW, 'Letter to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights…', 10 November 2021
[138] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2020' (page 12), February 2021
[139] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2020' (page 10), February 2021
[140] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2021' (pages 7 and 10), January 2022
[141] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2021' (page 16), January 2022
[142] IHRDC, 'Living in the Shadows of Oppression…' (3.6 Mass arrests…), 12 August 2021
[143] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (pages 38 to 39), January 2022
[144] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 34), January 2022

6.5.11 Examples of arrests of Christian converts, reported in the past year, are provided below. Their profile was not always provided. This list is not exhaustive.

6.5.12 In July 2021, 8 Christian converts were summoned to appear at the prosecutor's office of the Civil and Revolutionary Court of Dezful, southwest Iran to answer charges of 'propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran.'[145] Four of the men had previously been arrested in April 2021 and released only after signing a commitment not to engage in further Christian activities[146].

6.5.13 In December 2021, 2 Christian converts (brothers Mahmoud and Mansour Mardani-Kharaji) were arrested when their house church was raided by plain clothes officers in Isfahan. A month later, reports said the location of the pair was unknown and they had not been heard from since they were arrested[147] [148]. On 25 January 2022 it was confirmed the brothers had been released, although the conditions of the release were unknown[149].

6.5.14 In April 2022 a Christian convert in Anzali, a city in the north of Iran, was arrested after his house was raided and bibles were confiscated. The man's wife was also interrogated and, although the couple were not formally charged, she said she was accused of 'propaganda against the regime through involvement in house-church activities.'[150]

6.5.15 In July 2022, 12 Christian converts were arrested following a house church raid by security forces in Neyshabur City. Eight converts were released after signing a letter of commitment (to refrain from Christian activity), and 4 others remained in detention[151].

6.5.16 A Christian convert was arrested at his motorcycle repair shop on 30 July 2022. Both the man's home as well as that of his parents were searched and a picture of Jesus was confiscated. The man was detained, though charges against him were unknown[152].

See also Declaration to end Christian activity and re-education.

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6.6 Treatment of detainees

6.6.1 With regards to the treatment of Christian converts in detention, in a joint annual report, Article 18 and others noted that:

'Interrogation after arrest is often abusive, with Christians often being detained in solitary confinement in security offices maintained by the MOIS or Revolutionary Guard Corps. Emotional and psychological abuse during interrogation are commonly reported, while sexual harassment and physical assaults, though less common, have also been reported. Christian convert

[145] Article 18, 'Christians summoned to answer charges of "propaganda against…', 23 July 2021
[146] Article 18, 'Christian converts released on condition they stop meeting together', 27 April 2021
[147] Iran HRM, 'Iranian Christian converts face violations of their rights', 31 January 2022
[148] Article 18, 'Isfahan brothers still missing after Christmas arrest', 24 January 2022
[149] Article 18, 'Iranian Christian prisoners list', no date
[150] Article 18, 'Christian convert arrested in Anzali, family in distress', 21 April 2022
[151] Hrana, 'Four Christian Converts Arrested in Neyshabur', 19 July 2022
[152] Article 18, 'Christian convert arrested, detained in Karaj on unknown charges', 5 August 2022

Fatemeh (Mary) Mohammadi was one of 12 female prisoners of conscience to detail the psychological abuse suffered during interrogation and solitary confinement as part of a 2020 book on "white torture" inside Iran's prisons.'[153]

6.6.2 The USSD IRF Report 2021 observed that:

'Human rights NGOs reported poor prison conditions and mistreatment of religious minority prisoners, including beatings, sexual abuse, degradation specifically targeting their religious beliefs, and denial of medical treatment… According to numerous international human rights NGOs and media reporting, the government convicted and executed dissidents, political reformers, and peaceful protesters on charges of "enmity against God" and anti-Islamic propaganda and, in the case of members of some religious minorities, detained them and held them incommunicado… Authorities denied prisoners access to attorneys and convicted them based on "confessions" extracted under torture.'[154]

6.6.3 In its annual report on Iran 2020/21, Amnesty International noted that: 'Members of religious minorities, including… Christians… and converts from Shi'a Islam to Sunni Islam or Christianity faced… arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, torture and other ill-treatment for practising their faith.'[155]

6.6.4 The Iranian government has denied the use of torture to extract confessions against Christians[156].

6.6.5 In its annual human rights report for 2021, the USSD noted with regards to general treatment of detainees by security forces and prison personnel, and prison conditions:

'Although the constitution prohibits all forms of torture "for the purpose of extracting confession or acquiring information," use of physical and mental torture to coerce confessions remained prevalent, especially during pretrial detention. There were credible reports that security forces and prison personnel tortured and abused detainees and prisoners throughout the year…

'Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening due to food shortages, gross overcrowding, physical abuse, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care. Prisoner hunger strikes in protest of their treatment were frequent.'[157]

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6.7 Bail

6.7.1 According to Landinfo, reporting in 2017, it was common for arrested Christian converts to be released on bail. Bail can be paid in cash, by bank

[153] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2020' (page 11), February 2021
[154] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (Executive Summary), 2 June 2022
[155] Amnesty International, 'Human Rights in Iran: Review of 2020/21', 7 April 2021
[156] OHCHR, 'Iran (Islamic Republic of) IRN 26/2020 – Replies received' (para iv), 12 January 2021
[157] USSD, '2021 Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Iran' (section 1c), 12 April 2022

guarantee or by mortgaging real estate[158]. Bail can also be held in the form of property deeds[159] [160].

6.7.2 The joint 2021 report by Article 18 and others noted that 'Iranian Christians permitted conditional release while the judicial process was ongoing were subjected to bail demands as high as 600 million tomans (US$22,000). This is less than some of the bail demands in recent years (as much as US$220,000).'[161] The same sources noted in the joint 2020 annual report that 'The bail demands are often so high that they necessitate the submission of property deeds. If the family is unable to meet the bail demand, it can be reduced on appeal while the Christian remains in detention. However, bail demands have also been increased during the judicial process.'[162]

6.7.3 The 2018 DIS-DRC report noted that, according to 2 sources, 'House church members or leaders who are out on bail, are sometimes encouraged by the authorities to leave the country if they have a prominent profile.'[163]

6.7.4 According to an anonymous source cited in the same report, 'When a house church member or leader is out on bail, it would be possible for him to leave the country… Another option for a house church leader would be to stop the activities and announce in public that it has stopped. However, if the person is a government employee, the authorities would not like the person to leave the country.'[164] If a person on bail left the country, their bail would be forfeited[165] [166].

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6.8 Convictions and prison sentences

6.8.1 Article 18's Prisoner list provided a non-exhaustive summary of Christians reportedly known to have been arrested and detained, or those who were still awaiting trial, since the beginning of 2012[167].

6.8.2 Open Doors reported that 'It is difficult to monitor judicial prosecutions of Christians in Iran and it is likely that a significant number of faith-related cases against Christians will remain unknown because the victims are forced into silence.'[168] Both Open Doors and MEC noted that there have been no formal executions of Christians for apostasy since 1990[169] [170]. In 2010 a Christian was sentenced to death but this was overturned following international pressure[171].

[158] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (2)…' (page 22), 29 November 2017
[159] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2020' (page 11), February 2021
[160] Article 18, 'Convert begins four-year prison sentence for "spreading Christianity"', 11 January 2022
[161] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2021' (page 3), January 2022
[162] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2020' (page 11), February 2021
[163] DIS-DRC, 'Iran: House Churches and Converts' (page 11), 23 February 2018
[164] DIS-DRC, 'Iran: House Churches and Converts' (page 25), 23 February 2018
[165] DIS-DRC, 'Iran: House Churches and Converts' (page 31), 23 February 2018
[166] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 7), January 2022
[167] Article 18, 'Iranian Christian prisoners list', no date
[168] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 35), January 2022
[169] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 5), January 2022
[170] MEC, 'Iran', no date
[171] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 5), January 2022

6.8.3 The joint 2021 report by Article 18 and others noted that 'According to public sources, at least 30 Iranian Christians endured either prison or exile in 2021 on charges related to their Christian faith, and 21 were still serving these sentences by the end of the year – 18 in prison, one in exile, and two more serving the remainder of their sentences at home with an electronic tag.'[172]

6.8.4 In regard to electronic tagging, the same source said that this tactic may have been an attempt to reduce prison overcrowding[173].

6.8.5 A report published in Norwegian by Landinfo, dated June 2022, which concerned the criminal prosecution of Christian converts in the past 2 to 3 years, noted in its English summary that:

'Some of those who have received the most severe punishments (from 2-10 years in prison), have been convicted of leading/organizing house churches. Relations with missionary communities abroad also constitute a risk, as the spread of the Christian faith is considered to be the work of enemy states. Furthermore, several convicts are members of the targeted Church of Iran network. In a number of cases, however, not much is known about the profile of prosecuted individuals.'[174]

6.8.6 In a country report update dated July 2022, the USCIRF noted that:

'On November 3, 2021, Iran's Supreme Court ruled that Christian participation in house churches does not amount to a violation of national security prosecutable under articles 498 and 499 of the Islamic Penal Code. These articles, which prohibit membership in groups that "aim to perturb the security of the country," are often used to prosecute Christians in Iran. In late February 2022, Branch 34 of the Tehran Court of Appeal concurred with the Supreme Court's ruling, acquitting nine Christians facing legal charges. In January 2022, Iran also released two Christians early from Bushehr Central Prison.'[175]

6.8.7 Despite the Supreme Court ruling in November 2021, which in itself was not enough to set a legal precedent[176], reports of convictions and sentencings of Christians continued. Some examples are provided below. This list is not exhaustive.

6.8.8 In January 2022, one of four Christian converts who were convicted of 'acting against national security' by attending a house-church (Church of Iran in Rasht) and 'spreading "Zionist" Christianity', began a 4-year prison sentence[177]. The Christians were released on bail after their sentencing in August 2020[178]. However, to release the bail bond, secured by a friend's property deed, Hadi (Moslem) Rahimi handed himself into Evin Prison, Tehran. The 3 others remained free on bail[179].

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[172] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2021' (page 12), January 2022
[173] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2021' (page 7), January 2022
[174] Landinfo, 'Iran: Arrestasjon og straffeforfølgelse av kristne konvertitter – en oppdatering' (page 4), 20 June 2022
[175] USCIRF, 'Country update: Iran' (page 2), July 2022
[176] Article 18, 'Iran's Supreme Court rules Christians did not act against…', 25 November 2021
[177] Article 18, 'Convert begins four-year prison sentence for "spreading Christianity"', 11 January 2022
[178] Article 18, 'Prison sentences for Rasht converts', 5 August 2020
[179] Article 18, 'Convert begins four-year prison sentence for "spreading Christianity"', 11 January 2022

6.8.9 In March 2022, a Christian convert charged with acting against national security for attending a house church, was informed by the Tehran Prosecutor's Office that his request for early release had been rejected[180].

6.8.10 In April 2022, 3 Christian convert members of the Church of Iran were convicted under the amended Article 500 of the Penal Code for 'engaging in propaganda and education of deviant beliefs contrary to the holy Sharia' and 'connections with foreign leaders.'[181] The 3 men, who were arrested in September 2021 following raids on their house church in Rasht, and held in solitary confinement for over 2 weeks, were sentenced to 5 years each in prison and fines[182] [183]. According to the defendants' lawyer, the sentencing judge had 'indicated to him that he was under pressure to give the Christians the maximum possible sentences.'[184]

6.8.11 In April 2022 an Iranian-Armenian Christian man was sentenced to 10 years in prison for 'organizing and running evangelical "Zionist" home church with the intention to act against national security,' and 'maintaining satellite dish and receivers.'[185] [186] He was also sentenced to 10 years 'deprivation of social rights' after his release, such as restricting the type of employment he can have[187]. Also in the case, 2 convert members of the same house church received a fine, a ban on membership of social or political groups, and a 2-year ban on living in Tehran or its surrounding provinces and on international travel. They were also instructed to regularly report to the office of the Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) for 2 years[188]. All sentences were upheld on appeal in June 2022[189].

6.8.12 In June 2022, an Iranian-Armenian pastor was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 2 Christian converts were sentenced to 6 years each for their leadership roles in a house church. The pastor was also given a 2 year term of internal exile following his release, a 2 year ban on international travel and an order to report to the MOI for 2 years. In the same case, 4 other Christian converts were sentenced to between one and four years' imprisonment for house church membership, although they were allowed to pay fines instead of going to prison[190].

6.8.13 In July 2022, a Christian man serving a 10-year sentence and imprisoned since January 2018 for 'acting against national security by establishing house-churches', was denied parole for a fifth time, despite being eligible after having served over a third of his sentence. According to his lawyer, his detention was deemed as a 'deterrent' to other Christians[191].

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[180] USCIRF, 'Country update: Iran' (page 2), July 2022
[181] Article 18, 'Christian converts given five-year sentences for "deviant propaganda"', 11 April 2022
[182] Iran HRM, 'Iranian Christian converts sentenced to prison and fines', 9 April 2022
[183] Hrana, 'Three Christian Converts Sentenced to Total of 15 Years in Prison', 11 April 2022
[184] Article 18, 'Christian converts given five-year sentences for "deviant propaganda"', 11 April 2022
[185] Article 18, '10-year sentence for Iranian-Armenian for "disturbing" Christian teaching', 5 May 2022
[186] Hrana, 'Three Iranian Christians Sentenced to Imprisonment', 6 May 2022
[187] Article 18, '10-year sentence for Iranian-Armenian for "disturbing" Christian teaching', 5 May 2022
[188] Article 18, '10-year sentence for Iranian-Armenian for "disturbing" Christian teaching', 5 May 2022
[189] Hrana, 'Convictions against Three Christians Upheld on Appeal', 3 June 2022
[190] Article 18, 'Seven Iranian Christians sentenced to total of 32 years in prison', 7 June 2022
[191] Article 18, 'Convert's continued imprisonment a "deterrent" to other Christians…', 7 July 2022

6.9 Declaration to end Christian activity and re-education

6.9.1 A 2017 Landinfo report on arrests and prosecutions of Christians noted that 'It seems almost a routine that arrested converts are asked to sign a declaration promising to refrain from further Christian activity. Members who have not had a prominent role will normally be released shortly if they agree to sign such a statement. Arrested converts who refuse to sign, however, risk further imprisonment.'[192]

6.9.2 Landinfo made similar findings in its report dated June 2022, which covered the past 2 to 3 years. The report noted that 'Arrested individuals are not always detained and prosecuted – some are released shortly after committing to refrain from further Christian activity and/or to recant.'[193]

6.9.3 The joint 2020 report by Article 18 and others noted that 'During interrogation, there is pressure on Christian converts to recant or sign a commitment to refrain from Christian activities. Those who make such a commitment are often unwilling to publicise it, but in 2020 several Christians reported in confidence that they had been put under pressure to agree to such a restriction on their religious freedom.'[194]

6.9.4 The joint 2021 report by Article 18 and others noted that:

'Over the space of two weeks in January and February [2021], Ministry of Intelligence agents summoned 11 Christian couples from the city of Fardis to sign commitments to refrain from meeting together, whether in person or online. This was the first known instance of Christians being banned from online meetings, culminating in three of the Christians also becoming the first to be charged under the newly amended Article 500 and sentenced to five years each in prison, later reduced to three years on appeal…'[195]

6.9.5 Other reports by Article 18 and Hrana indicated that, during 2021 and 2022, Christian converts were to be made to sign a commitment to stop engaging in Christian activities[196] [197].

6.9.6 Open Doors UK reported that a Christian convert, arrested in February 2019 and released on bail, was forced to take re-education classes with an Islamic cleric. According to the report, the man took 4 classes then refused to return. Following delays due to COVID-19, he was convicted of 'propaganda against the Islamic republic' in April 2021, his appeal was rejected in June, and he began a 10-month prison sentence in July 2021[198].

6.9.7 Article 18 reported in February 2022 that 'A group of Christian converts cleared of any wrongdoing in November [following a Supreme Court ruling[199]] are now being forced to undertake "re-education" classes in the Islamic faith.' Despite being acquitted, the group were summoned by the

[192] Landinfo, 'Iran: Christian converts and house churches (2)…' (page 22), 29 November 2017
[193] Landinfo, 'Iran: Arrestasjon og straffeforfølgelse av kristne konvertitter…' (page 4), 20 June 2022
[194] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2020' (page 10), February 2021
[195] Article 18 and others, 'Annual Report 2021' (page 7), January 2022
[196] Article 18, 'Christian converts released on condition they stop meeting together', 27 April 2021
[197] Hrana, 'Four Christian Converts Arrested in Neyshabur', 19 July 2022
[198] Open Doors UK, 'Iranian convert who refused to inform on other Christians…', 2 August 2021
[199] USCIRF, 'Country update: Iran' (page 2), July 2022

IRGC and will have to undertake 10 compulsory sessions with an Islamic cleric 'who will attempt to revert them to Islam.'[200]

See also Arrests and criminal charges.

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This section was updated on 14 September 2022

7. Right to education and employment

7.1 Education

7.1.1 Open Doors noted that 'Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education.' The report added:

'The children of converts are automatically registered as Muslim and have to go through the Islamic-based educational system, which has been further Islamized since the 1979 Revolution. Some converts have tried to oppose this, but this has led to court cases against them and threats against the children involved. Many choose not to engage in this legal dispute for the fear of more persecution. Furthermore, children of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are forced to take Quranic and Islamic classes at elementary school. Courses like "History of Islam", "Quranic Teachings" and Arabic are mandatory for all post-secondary students regardless of their religion. University application forms require the applicants to indicate their religion.

'If a Muslim-born individual mentions his/her religion as Christianity, he/she will not be accepted for study at university. Thus, post-secondary education is practically not available to converts with an Islamic background (unless they keep their new faith hidden when they apply).'[201]

7.1.2 The IRB response (2017 to February 2021) noted that:

'According to sources [cited in parentheses], Christian converts "face serious discrimination" in education (Representative 15 Feb. 2021) or are "deprived of educational opportunities" (Article18, et al. Jan. 2021, 13). According to the joint report by Article18 and other organizations, a Christian convert and activist was expelled from university in December 2019 (Article18, et al. Jan. 2021, 13). Sources indicate that Christian converts who refuse to be designated as Muslim (Research Fellow 22 Feb. 2021) or who do not claim to be Muslim when they apply (Open Doors Nov. 2020, 33) cannot be accepted in universities (Research Fellow 22 Feb. 2021; Open Doors Nov. 2020, 33). The Arseh Sevom representative stated that Christian children are "often prevented from" attending Christian schools (Arseh Sevom 15 Feb. 2021). Open Doors reports that the children of Christian converts are "automatically" registered as Muslims and have to attend Islamic schools (Open Doors Nov. 2020, 32).'[202]

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[200] Article 18, 'Converts cleared of any crime must now attend "re-education"…', 1 February 2022
[201] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 33), January 2022
[202] IRB, 'Iran: Situation and treatment of Christians by society and the authorities…', 9 March 2021

7.2 Employment

7.2.1 The USSD IRF Report 2021 noted, in regard to non-Muslims in general, that:

'By law, non-Muslims may not serve in the judiciary, the security services (which are separate from the regular armed forces), or as public school principals. Officials screen candidates for elected offices and applicants for public sector employment based on their adherence to and knowledge of Islam and loyalty to the Islamic Republic (gozinesh review requirements), although members of recognized religious minorities may serve in the lower ranks of government if they meet these loyalty requirements. Government workers who do not observe Islamic principles and rules are subject to penalties and may be fired or barred from work in a particular sector.'[203]

7.2.2 Open Doors noted that 'ethnic' Christians '… face employment restrictions (being Muslim is a requirement for many jobs, in particular in government positions and the authorities have been known to force Muslim employers to dismiss Christian employees)…'[204]

7.2.3 Citing numerous sources, the IRB response (2017 to February 2021) stated:

'Article18 indicates that "many" government agencies do not hire religious minorities (Article18 29 Nov. 2019). The CHRI representative stated that "[t]he practice of requiring job applicants to state their religion also embeds discrimination against religious minorities in hiring and employment practices" (CHRI 11 Feb. 2021)... The US International Religious Freedom Report for 2019 states that "[n]on-Muslims may not be elected to a representative body or hold senior government, intelligence, or military positions, with the exception of five of the 290 parliament seats [, which are] reserved by the constitution for recognized religious minorities" (US 10 June 2020, 8). The Research Fellow similarly stated that Christians cannot hold "important" positions in the government or the military (Research Fellow 22 Feb. 2021). The same source added the following:

'The public service, for example, is in theory denied to non-Muslims, yet a number of Christians are nevertheless employed in such jobs. Senior roles in banks are also technically denied to non-Muslims, although there are several [non-Muslims] employed as senior managers and auditors. However, Iranian Christians are more likely to be stigmatised than other Christian groups and are more likely to find barriers to employment. One key issue is Iranian identity documents – the kart-e melli (ID card) and shenas-nameh (identity booklet). These indicate religion, and for Iranian Christians who refuse to be categorized as Muslims (their official designation), this can be a barrier to employment ... In recent years, there was an attempt to mitigate this by providing an "other" category on identity documents, but this was withdrawn in early 2020 and even when it was in place, the "other" category would usually indicate that the person was of an "undesirable" religion … (Research Fellow 22 Feb. 2021)

'The HRAI representative further indicated that

[203] USSD, '2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran' (section II), 2 June 2022
[204] Open Doors, 'Iran: Full Country Dossier' (page 11), January 2022

'while [Christians] do not face difficulty accessing employment at basic levels, they face difficulty in reaching high management levels and we do not have high level managers that are Christian unless it is within their own societies. … Those who have converted to Christianity … face serious discrimination [in employment]. (Representative 15 Feb. 2021)

'Article18 reports that in June 2020, seven Christian converts in Bushehr were convicted of "propaganda against the state" and received sentences that included employment restrictions: one was banned for life from working at any national institution while others were banned from working in their profession for the length of their exile sentence (Article18 29 June 2020).'[205]

7.2.4 The IHRDC report noted that Christian converts:

'… have been subjected to systematic employment discrimination in the public and private sectors. Iranian citizens are usually required to declare their religion in employment documents and to attend congregational prayers. A number of Christian converts have lost their jobs or could not be employed due to these conditions. In many government jobs, including in the armed forces, having belief in Islam and practical commitment to Velayat-e Faqih are essential requirements for employment. As the result, religious minorities, such as Christian converts, cannot be recruited by the armed forces. Male members of religious minorities, however, shall fulfill two years of conscription, unless they become exempted from military service because of medical conditions.'[206]

See also Documentation.

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[205] IRB, 'Iran: Situation and treatment of Christians by society and the authorities…', 9 March 2021
[206] IHRDC, 'Living in the Shadows of Oppression…' (Right to education and work), 12 August 2021

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 ToR, 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
    - In general
    - Christians
    - Converts
    - Denominations
- House Churches
    - Numbers
    - Types
    - Locations
- Legal framework on religious minorities
    - Generally
    - 'Ethnic' Christians
    - Christian converts
- Treatment by the state
    - Christians and converts
    - House church monitoring and raids, social media monitoring
    - Arrest, detention and prosecution, bail conditions
    - Charges, trials, sentences
    - Recant and re-educate
- Right to education and employment

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Version control

Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **7.0**
- valid from **21 September 2022**

Official – sensitive: Start of section

The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use.

Official – sensitive: End of section

Changes from last version of this note

Updated country information and assessment

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