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Iran: Situation and treatment of Erfan Keyhani [Erfan-e Keyhani, Erfan-e Halgheh, Erfan Halgheh, Erfan Halqeh, Erfan-e Halghe] practitioners and their family members by society and the authorities (2019–March 2021) [IRN200459.E]

1. Erfan Keyhani

1.1 Overview

Erfan Keyhani is also called "Interuniversalism" (IEHCF n.d.a; BBC 5 Apr. 2020), "Inter-universal Mysticism" (HRWF Int'l 1 Mar. 2018, 33), "Interuniversalism Mysticism", "Faralogy" (IEHCF n.d.a), and "Cosmic Mysticism" (Doostdar 2018, 16). Alireza Doostdar, an assistant professor of Islamic studies and the anthropology of religion at the University of Chicago (The University of Chicago n.d.), describes Erfan Keyhani as "an Iranian spiritual-therapeutic movement" (Doostdar 2018, 18).

According to sources, Erfan Keyhani was developed by Mohammad Ali Taheri (Doostdar 2018, 182; HRWF Int'l 1 Mar. 2018, 33; IEHCF n.d.a).

A report on freedom of religion and belief in 2017 by Human Rights Without Frontiers International (HRWF Int'l) [1] indicates that Erfan Keyhani "may have as many as 20,000 trainers worldwide" and that "[m]illions of people have been exposed to the practical applications of Inter-universal mysticism" (HRWF Int'l 1 Mar. 2018, 33). According to interview notes in a May 2019 Danish Immigration Service report on Erfan Keyhani, a former member [2] of Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee in the Iranian city of Tabriz indicated that "[i]t is assumed by [Erfan Keyhani] followers that millions of Iranians have attended [Erfan Keyhani] courses," but that there are "no confirmed statistics" (Denmark May 2019, 13, 17).

1.2 Beliefs

As cited in the Danish report, the former member of Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee indicated that Erfan Keyhani "is neither a religion nor a religious sect" and "does not relate to people's religion and belief," adding that "everyone from every religion can join [Erfan Keyhani] and benefit from its teachings" (Denmark May 2019, 13). The website of the Interuniversalism Erfan Halqeh Canada Foundation (IEHCF) states that "Interuniversalism holds no specific dogma, nor [does it] requir[e] the element of faith" (IEHCF n.d.a).

The HRWF Int'l report notes that Erfan Keyhani is a "spiritual movement" that, according to Taheri, "promotes awareness and methodologies for achieving Inter-universal consciousness, which are consistent with the teachings of Islam" (HRWF Int'l 1 Mar. 2018, 33). According to the former member of Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee, *Erfan* means "to reach illumination, enlightenment and clarity of vision" about "existence and the universe through immersing oneself in love (*Eshgh*)" (Denmark May 2019, 13).

1.2.1 Faradarmani and Psymontology

According to the HRWF Int'l report, Erfan Keyhani "features two complementary approaches to healing: [f]aradarmani, which focuses on the treatment of physical disease, and [p]symontology, which uses holistic psychology to address psychiatric disorders" (HRWF Int'l 1 Mar. 2018, 33). The former member of Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee noted that faradarmani is considered a subdivision of Erfan Keyhani and focuses on curing physical and "psychical" ("caused by disturbance in emotional trends") diseases, while psymontology is used to cure mental and "mentosomatic" (stemming from "perceptual complications") diseases (Denmark May 2019, 14). The IEHCF website notes that faradarmani is a way "to treat physical, mental, and emotional disorders at their root cause" (IEHCF n.d.b). The same website states that psymontology "addresses conditions which have no physical cause," including psychological disorders (IEHCF n.d.c).

1.3 Structure and Membership

As cited in the Danish report, the former member of Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee indicated that "[c]urrently" Erfan Keyhani practitioners "are not organised within a formal organisational structure" and further stated that there are active Erfan Keyhani centres in Canada, Sweden, the UK, and Austria (Denmark May 2019, 15). The same source noted that "[n]one of these centres functions as [Erfan Keyhani's] main centre outside Iran and there is no hierarchical relation among them" and that, along with the centres, "there are several unorganised groups and individuals, like the source himself, who are active in awareness raising and other activities" (Denmark May 2019, 15). Doostdar states that after Taheri and some of his followers were convicted, Erfan Keyhani groups "[i]ncreasingly" faced "internal discord" as some "masters" concentrated on campaigning for the release of Taheri while others advocated for choosing new leadership (Doostdar 2018, 183). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The former member of Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee noted that until Taheri was arrested in 2010, he would issue membership cards to followers with the individual's name and the courses they had passed noted on the card; however, since Taheri's arrest in 2010, cards have been issued by Erfan Keyhani instructors to followers who attend courses (Denmark May 2019, 15). The same source added that cards are issued by each individual instructor since "there is no official organisation authorising it" and that "[a]part from these cards, no other documents proving membership of or affiliation to [Erfan Keyhani] are issued in Iran" (Denmark May 2019, 15). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

1.4 Activities

As cited in the Danish report, the former member of Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee indicated that Erfan Keyhani practitioners in Iran facilitate courses, hold "spontaneou[s]" meetings to discuss mystical and spiritual matters, and participate in charitable and humanitarian activities (Denmark May 2019, 15). The same source added that Erfan Keyhani practitioners have also held protests against Taheri's arrest (Denmark May 2019, 15). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Situation and Treatment of Practitioners of Erfan Keyhani

2.1 Treatment by Society

As cited in the Danish report, the former member of Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee noted that Erfan Keyhani is "generally a well-reputed movement" in Iranian society and that, aside from certain small, conservative religious groups who have a negative perception of Erfan Keyhani, "there is no social discrimination" against Erfan Keyhani practitioners (Denmark May 2019, 18). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of IEHCF indicated that Erfan Keyhani practitioners can be categorized into two groups: on one hand, followers and practitioners, and on the other, teachers and tutors (IEHCF 8 Feb. 2021). The same source stated that as long as followers and practitioners "comply" with authorities and "do not defy them" after they are caught attending classes or practicing Erfan Keyhani, they do not face social discrimination, employment discrimination, or violence (IEHCF 8 Feb. 2021). However, the same source indicated that teachers and tutors and their families "are heavily discriminated against in the areas of employment, education, and many other social aspects of their lives" (IEHCF 8 Feb. 2021). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.2 Treatment by Authorities

The representative of IEHCF noted that in the case of followers and practitioners, "there is an ongoing government campaign to intimidate and deter members of the public from attending classes and doing the practices" (IEHCF 8 Feb. 2021). As cited in the Danish report, the former member of Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee indicated that the Iranian authorities want Erfan Keyhani followers to stop spreading "alternative interpretations" of the Twelver version of Shia Islam and instead "promote the regime's understanding of Shia Islam through their courses" (Denmark May 2019, 17). The HRWF Int'l report notes that "the Iranian government has sought to actively repress the spread of Erfan-e Halghe, claiming that Taheri is 'acting against national security' and guilty of 'corruption on earth'" (HRWF Int'l 1 Mar. 2018, 33). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2019* indicates that according to NGO reports, Erfan Keyhani followers "continued to be subject to frequent arrests, detentions, harassment, and surveillance" (US 10 June 2020, 21). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) [3] stated that there "have been multiple reports of arrest[s] and prison terms given to Erfan Halgheh practitioners" (HRANA 2 Feb. 2021). The same source indicated that "there has been a significant decline in arrest[s] and harassment of Erfan Halgheh [m]embers" since Taheri left Iran [4] (HRANA 2 Feb. 2021). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The IEHCF representative indicated that teachers and tutors "suffer the most social pressure due to government smear campaigns intended to deter the public from participating in Erfan Halqeh" (IEHCF 8 Feb. 2021). The same source stated that "[m]any active" Erfan Keyhani teachers and practitioners have been sentenced to "long" terms of imprisonment and "heavy" fines (IEHCF 8 Feb. 2021). The IEHCF representative also noted that teachers of Erfan Keyhani are "heavily under pressure [from] the police and judiciary systems" and face interrogation under torture if they are caught (IEHCF 8 Feb. 2021). According to the former member of Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee, "[i]t is particularly individuals who have been very active" within Erfan Keyhani, including course instructors, who are "targeted" by Iranian authorities (Denmark May 2019, 17). The same source states that "[g]enerally, the level of persecution of [Erfan Keyhani] followers depends on [their] level of activity and how open and visible the activity is," adding that Erfan Keyhani practitioners who participated in public protests against Taheri's arrest have been "subjected to arrest and harassment" (Denmark May 2019, 17). However, the former member of Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee noted that in certain instances, "low-profil[e]" individuals, such as Erfan Keyhani course attendees, have been "arbitrarily arrested or harassed" by authorities (Denmark May 2019, 17).

According to Agence France-Presse (AFP), Taheri was arrested for the first time in 2010 (AFP 23 Apr. 2019). The same source reports that he was arrested again in May 2011 and charged with "'corruption on earth' – one of the gravest charges in the Islamic [R]epublic" (AFP 23 Apr. 2019). The HRWF Int'l report indicates that in October 2011 Taheri was convicted of "'insulting Islamic sanctities'" and was sentenced to five years in prison (HRWF Int'l 1 Mar. 2018, 34). Sources report that Taheri was sentenced to death in 2015 and 2017, but both death sentences were overturned (AFP 23 Apr. 2019; Reuters 18 Aug. 2018). According to Reuters, Taheri's second death sentence was overturned in 2018 and replaced with a five-year prison sentence (Reuters 18 Aug. 2018). Sources report that Taheri was released in April 2019 after serving almost eight years in prison (AFP 23 Apr. 2019; US 10 June 2020, 21).

The HRWF Int'l report states that Erfan Keyhani followers have been arrested at "different times and places" on charges including "insulting the sacred, corruption of earth, blasphemy, obtaining illicit wealth and interference in medical affairs" and have received sentences ranging from two to five years in prison (HRWF Int'l 1 Mar. 2018, 35). The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2019* indicates that according to HRANA, in February 2019 authorities arrested an Erfan Keyhani practitioner and sentenced them to five years in prison for "'acting against national security'" (US 10 June 2020, 21). Sources report that an Erfan Keyhani practitioner was sentenced to 13 years in prison and 74 lashes (HRANA 2 Feb. 2021; BBC 5 Apr. 2020). BBC Monitoring's March 2020 monthly human rights report on Iran indicates that the Erfan Keyhani practitioner was sentenced for charges including "'propaganda' against the establishment" (BBC 5 Apr. 2020). The HRANA representative indicated that one of the charges was acting "'against national security through the administration of the [so-called] illegal Erfan Halgheh channel'" (HRANA 2 Feb. 2021, square brackets in original).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] Human Rights Without Frontiers International (HRWF Int'l) is "a non-profit association that seeks to shape European and international policy in ways that strengthen democracy, uphold the rule of law and protect human rights globally" (HRWF Int'l n.d.).

[2] The interviewee was active on Erfan Keyhani's Coordination Committee from 2007 until 2010, at which point Mohammad Ali Taheri was arrested and the committee member's house was raided (Denmark May 2019, 13).

[3] Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) is a non-profit news organization established by a group of Iranian human rights activists that reports "daily news of human rights violations in Iran" (HRANA n.d.).

[4] The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reports that Taheri arrived in Toronto on 8 March 2020 after being granted asylum by Canada (US 16 Apr. 2020).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: assistant professor of history at a university in South Carolina who studies the occult sciences in Iran; assistant professor of Islamic studies and the anthropology of religion at a university in Illinois who wrote a book on metaphysical experimentation and Islam in Iran; assistant professor of Islamic Studies at a university in Vermont who has written on mysticism in Iran; associate professor of Iranian and Islamic history at a university in Texas; associate professor of Islamic studies at a seminary in Connecticut; Center for Human Rights in Iran; Erfan Keyhani (Halgheh) – representative in the UK, representative in the US; Foundation for Democracy in Iran; Impact Iran; International Organisation to Preserve Human Rights; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center; Iran Human Rights Monitor; Mission for the Establishment of Human Rights in Iran; post-doctoral fellow at a university in the UK who studies the Islamic occult; professor of culture and society at a university in Denmark who studies mysticism and spirituality in Islam; researcher at a university in France who has written on New Age spiritualities in Iran.

Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; Amnesty International; Australia – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; BBC; Bertelsmann Stiftung; Center for Human Rights in Iran; ecoi.net; Erfan Keyhani (Halgheh); EU – European Asylum Support Office; Factiva; Fédération internationale pour les droits humains; Foundation for Democracy in Iran; France – Office français de protection de réfugiés et apatrides; *The Guardian*; Human Rights Watch; Impact Iran; International Organisation to Preserve Human Rights; Iran Human Rights; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center; Iran Human Rights Monitor; IranWire; Middle East Institute; Minority Rights Group International; Mission for the Establishment of Human Rights in Iran; *The New York Times*; Norway – Landinfo; Radio Farda; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; Swiss Refugee Council; *Tehran Times*; UK – Home Office; UN – Human Rights Council, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld; US – Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress; Voice of America; *The Washington Post*; Zamaneh Media.

ecoi.net summary:

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