

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	697
Land:	Iran
Kilde:	Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation. ACCORD
Titel:	Query response on Iran: Treatment of atheists by State and non-State actors
Udgivet:	12. juni 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	29. august 2017

[EN](#) | [DE](#)

- Source:
ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation
- Title:
Query response on Iran: Treatment of atheists by State and non-State actors [a-10099]
- Publication date:
12 June 2017
- ecoi.net summary: Query response on Iran: Treatment of atheists by State and non-State actors [ID 342109]
- Countries:
Iran

Recommended citation:

ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation: Query response on Iran: Treatment of atheists by State and non-State actors [a-10099], 12 June 2017 (available at ecoi.net) http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/342109/472797_en.html (accessed 15 August 2017)



Query response on Iran: Treatment of atheists by State and non-State actors [a-10099]

12 June 2017

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to ACCORD as well as information provided by experts within time constraints and in accordance with ACCORD's methodological standards and the Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI).

This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status, asylum or other form of international protection.

Please read in full all documents referred to.

Non-English language information is summarised in English. Original language quotations are provided for reference.

The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), an umbrella organisation of humanist, atheist, rationalist, secular, sceptic, freethought and Ethical Culture organisations worldwide, notes in its 2016 "Freedom of Thought Report" that "[i]t is illegal or unrecognised to identify as an atheist or as non-religious" (IHEU, 2016).

According to a March 2016 article of The Independent, a British newspaper, Iran is one of 13 countries in the world "where being an atheist is punishable by death" (The Independent, 30 March 2016).

As noted in the US Department of State (USDOS) 2015 Report on International Religious Freedom, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran "does not address the right of Muslim citizens to change or renounce their religious beliefs" (USDOS, 10 August 2016, section 2). The

same report further mentions that “[n]on-Muslims and non-Shia reportedly continued to face societal discrimination”. (USDOS, 10 August 2016, Executive Summary).

A senior research fellow in Iranian studies at a university in Germany stated in his August 2015 email response (published in the September 2015 ACCORD COI Compilation “Iran: Freedom of Religion; Treatment of Religious and Ethnic Minorities”) that atheists usually do not express their views in public and are thus able to lead normal lives in Iran without facing any further restrictions. Whereas atheists obviously cannot discuss their opinions in public, they often use the internet to present their views anonymously. They have a number of active internet pages and blogs including a Facebook page with more than 187,000 followers. (Senior research fellow in Iranian studies at a university in Germany, 27 August 2015)

In a May 2017 email response, the same senior research fellow wrote that based on general impressions gained through colleagues, friends and relatives and from annual visits to Iran, the above comments on the situation of atheists are still accurate. However, the senior research fellow admitted that he does not specifically work on the issue of atheism in Iran (Senior research fellow in Iranian studies at a university in Germany, 9 May 2017).

A university professor in the United States who specializes in Iran, wrote in an April 2017 email response:

“[I]nformally, many Iranians express atheistic ideas. However, I doubt if there is an organized atheist movement as such. There are some professional organizations abroad where discussion of religion is discouraged, but if you look at their membership, most are still Shia Muslims. Atheism is not clearly spelled out but whenever present (in the form of non-practicing religion), it manifests as secular nationalism which ironically carries some of the biases of the religious elements.” (University professor in the United States who specializes in Iran, 28 April 2017)

A June 2014 fact-finding-mission report of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) states with reference to Mansour Borji, an advocacy officer of the Article 18 initiative of the United Council of Iranian Churches, a human rights organization working on issues pertaining to religious freedom:

“Asked about the obstacles a Christian convert may face in daily life, Mansour Borji explained that Iran is quite a mixed society and that there is both a conservative group of people and a more secular group of people. Some people from the conservative communities pay more attention to public manifestation of religion such as participation in Friday prayers etc., whereas people from the more secular segment do not pay any attention to such public manifestations. The source assessed that there are more and more atheists in Iran and that this is more accepted among some Iranians.” (DIS, 23 June 2014, p. 13)

For further information on the treatment of atheists, please consult our September 2015 COI Compilation “Iran: Freedom of Religion; Treatment of Religious and Ethnic Minorities”, section 1.5.12 (“Atheists”) (pp. 50-51):

- ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation: Iran: Freedom of Religion; Treatment of Religious and Ethnic Minorities; COI Compilation,

September 2015 (available at ecoi.net)

http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/90_1443443478_accord-iran-coi-compilation-september-2015.pdf

No further information could be found on the treatment of atheists by State and non-State actors.

Sources (all links accessed 12 June 2017)

- ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation: Iran: Freedom of Religion; Treatment of Religious and Ethnic Minorities; COI Compilation, September 2015 (available at ecoi.net)
http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/90_1443443478_accord-iran-coi-compilation-september-2015.pdf
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- IHEU – International Humanist and Ethical Union: The Freedom of Thought Report - Iran, 2016
<http://freethoughtreport.com/countries/asia-southern-asia/iran/>
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<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/the-13-countries-where-being-an-atheist-is-punishable-by-death-a6960561.html>
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