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Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

Iran: Christians and Christian converts

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Preface

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and policy guidance to Home Office decision makers on handling particular types of protection and human rights claims. This includes whether claims are likely to justify the granting of asylum, humanitarian protection or discretionary leave and whether – in the event of a claim being refused – it is likely to be certifiable as ‘clearly unfounded’ under s94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers must consider claims on an individual basis, taking into account the case specific facts and all relevant evidence, including: the policy guidance contained with this note; the available COI; any applicable caselaw; and the Home Office casework guidance in relation to relevant policies.

Country information

COI in this note has been researched in accordance with principles set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#) and the [European Asylum Support Office’s research guidelines, Country of Origin Information report methodology](#), namely taking into account its relevance, reliability, accuracy, objectivity, currency, transparency and traceability.

All information is carefully selected from generally reliable, publicly accessible sources or is information that can be made publicly available. Full publication details of supporting documentation are provided in footnotes. Multiple sourcing is normally used to ensure that the information is accurate, balanced and corroborated, and that a comprehensive and up-to-date picture at the time of publication is provided. Information is compared and contrasted, whenever possible, to provide a range of views and opinions. The inclusion of a source is not an endorsement of it or any views expressed.

Feedback

Our goal is to continuously improve our material. Therefore, 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 make recommendations to him about the content of the Home Office’s COI material. 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. IAGCI may be contacted at:

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Information about the IAGCI’s work and a list of the COI documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector’s website at <http://icinspector.independent.gov.uk/country-information-reviews/>

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Policy guidance

Updated: 22 February 2018

1. Introduction

1.1 Basis of claim

1.1.1 Fear of persecution by the state because the person:

- is a Christian; or
- has converted to Christianity from another religion (or no religion) and/or
- actively seeks to convert others to Christianity.

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2. Consideration of issues

2.1 Credibility

2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the [Asylum 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 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 Assessment of risk

a. Those born into the Christian religion

2.2.1 The Iranian Constitution recognises Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities. However, the state discriminates against them on the basis of religion or belief as all laws and regulations are based on unique Shi'a Islamic criteria. It is difficult for many Christians to live freely and openly in Iran. Such discrimination is prevalent throughout Iran (see [Ethnic minority churches](#)).

2.2.2 In general, the level of discrimination faced by Christians born into the religion, who are not actively evangelising, is not sufficiently serious in its nature and frequency as to amount to persecution or serious harm.

2.2.3 Where the person has come to the attention of the authorities previously for reasons other than their religion, then that in combination with their religion, may put them at increased risk. Each case must be considered on its facts.

b. Evangelical/house churches

2.2.4 Members of evangelical/house churches are subject to harassment, arrest, close surveillance and imprisonment by the Iranian authorities (see [Evangelical Protestant churches](#) and [House churches](#)).

- 2.2.5 Christians who can demonstrate that they have, either in Iran or in the UK, practised evangelical or proselytising activities and will continue to do so on return to Iran because of their affiliation to evangelical churches, or that they would wear in public outward manifestations of their faith such as a visible crucifix, will attract the adverse notice of the authorities on return to Iran and will be at risk of persecution.

c. [Christian converts](#)

- 2.2.6 Christians who have converted from Islam are considered apostates – a criminal offence in Iran. Sharia law does not allow for conversion from Islam to another religion, and it is not possible for a person to change their religious affiliation on personal documentation. There are reports of some Christian converts (and sometimes their family members) facing physical attacks, harassment, threats, surveillance, arrest, detention, as well as torture and ill-treatment in detention (see [Christian converts](#)).
- 2.2.7 In the country guidance case of [SZ and JM \(Christians – FS confirmed\) Iran CG \[2008\] UKAIT 00082](#) (heard on 13 -15 May 2008 and promulgated on 12 November 2008) the Upper Tribunal held that conditions for converts to sacrament-based churches may be such that they could not reasonably be expected to return to Iran (para 145). As regards ‘ordinary’ converts (i.e. those who are not active evangelisers), the Tribunal held that there is a risk, but not a real risk, of serious harm if returned to Iran (para 148).
- 2.2.8 Although this country guidance case was heard over 9 years’ ago the available country evidence indicates that the findings remain valid.
- 2.2.9 In the case of [A. v. Switzerland](#), the ECtHR confirmed that converts who have not come to the attention of the authorities, including for reasons other than their conversion, and who practised their faith discreetly, do not face a real risk of ill-treatment upon return. At paragraph 29 of the judgement the ECtHR referred to the CPIN of February 2017 to inform their approach. This position is similar to that of the Swiss (and also Sweden and the Netherlands), and has been considered by their domestic courts.
- 2.2.10 Those who have converted from Islam and whose conversion is likely to come to the attention of the authorities in Iran (including through evangelical or proselytising activities or having previously come to the adverse attention of the authorities for other reasons) are at real risk of persecution on return (see [Activities which attract attention from the authorities](#)).
- 2.2.11 Some sources suggest that a person who has converted to Christianity abroad and returned to Iran would only be at risk if the authorities previously had an interest in their activities in Iran or if the convert would engage in evangelical or proselytising activities (see [Treatment of those returning to Iran who have converted abroad](#)).
- 2.2.12 Those persons who return to Iran having converted while abroad and who do not actively seek to proselytise and those who consider their religion a personal matter, who seek no public expression of their faith, may be able to continue practising Christianity discreetly.
- 2.2.13 In cases where the person will be discreet about their religion on return, the reasons for such discretion need to be considered in the light of [HJ \(Iran\)](#).

Decision makers should take account of how the person has practised their religion whilst in the UK. A person should not be expected to conceal their religion, their conversion or their activities relating to the conversion of others, if they are not willing to do so. However, if the person would conceal his or her religion or religious activities for reasons other than for a fear of persecution, then the person would have no basis for their claim for international protection. Each case must be considered on its facts.

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2.3 Protection

- 2.3.1 As the person's fear is of persecution by the state, they will not be able to avail themselves of the protection of the authorities.
- 2.3.2 For further guidance on assessing the availability of state protection, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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2.4 Internal relocation

- 2.4.1 As the person's fear is of persecution by the state, in the majority of cases they will not be able to relocate to escape that risk.
- 2.4.2 In line with the findings in [AS \(Iran\) v The Secretary of State for the Home Department \[2017\] EWCA Civ 1539 \(12 October 2017\)](#) where a person does not actively seek to proselytise and considers their religion a personal matter, internal relocation to an area where they would not be known as a convert may be an option. Each case must be considered on its facts.
- 2.4.3 For further guidance on internal relocation and the factors to be considered, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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2.5 Certification

- 2.5.1 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.
- 2.5.2 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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3. Religion in Iran

3.1 Religious demography

- 3.1.1 The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook, noted that Iran has an estimated population of 82,021,564 million (July 2017 est.).¹ The estimated number of Christians living in Iran varied greatly. UN data from 2011 suggests that the number is 117,704.² The United States Religious Freedom report quote the figures from the World Christian database as stating there are approximately 285,000 Christians in Iran.³ Open Doors, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 8 August 2017, stated that many converts do not publicly report their faith due to persecution so it is difficult to record the exact numbers of Iranian Christian converts. Open Doors believes the number to be 800,000, although this is a conservative estimate. Other estimates put the number between 400,000- 500,000 right up to 3 million.⁴
- 3.1.2 The 2017 US State Department Religious Freedom Report , covering events in 2016 (the 2016 USSD IRF report) noted that:
- ‘The majority of Christians are ethnic Armenians concentrated in Tehran and Isfahan. Estimates by the Assyrian Church of the total Assyrian and Chaldean Christian population put their combined number at 7,000. There are also Protestant denominations, including evangelical groups, but there are no authoritative data on their numbers. Christian groups outside the country estimate the size of the Protestant community to be less than 10,000, although many Protestants and other converts to Christianity from Islam reportedly practice in secret.’⁵

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3.2 Legal framework

- 3.2.1 The 2016 USSD IRF report noted that:
- ‘The constitution defines the country as an Islamic republic, and Ja’afari Shia Islam to be the official state religion. The constitution stipulates all laws and regulations must be based on “Islamic criteria” and official interpretation of

¹ The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook, ‘Iran- people and society’, last updated 3 January 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>. Accessed: 17 January 2018

² United Nations Statistics Division, <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=POP&f=tableCode%3A28>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

³ United States Department of State, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2016’, (section 1) 15 August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=268890>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

⁴ UK Home Office, ‘Interview with Open Doors, 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

⁵ United States Department of State, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2016’, (section 1) 15 August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=268890>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

sharia. The constitution states citizens shall enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, “in conformity with Islamic criteria.”

‘The constitution states the investigation of an individual’s ideas is forbidden, and no one may be “subjected to questioning and aggression for merely holding an opinion.” The law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The only recognized conversions are from another religion to Islam. Apostasy from Islam is a crime punishable by death. Under the law, a child born to a Muslim father is considered to be Muslim.

‘By law, non-Muslims may not engage in public persuasion, or attempted conversion of Muslims. These activities are considered proselytizing and are 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. Some exceptions are made for foreigners belonging to unrecognized religious groups.

‘The penal code specifies the death sentence for moharebeh (enmity towards or waging war against God or “drawing a weapon on the life, property or chastity of people or to cause terror as it creates the atmosphere of insecurity”), fisd fil-arz (corruption on earth – including apostasy or heresy), and *sabb al-nabi* (“insulting the prophets” or “insulting the sanctities”).

‘The constitution states Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians are the only recognized religious minorities. “Within the limits of the law,” they have permission to perform religious rites and ceremonies and to form religious societies. They are also free to address personal affairs and religious education according to their own religious canon. The government does not recognize evangelicals as Christian. Because the law prohibits citizens from converting from Islam to another religion, the government only recognizes the Christianity of citizens who are Armenian or Assyrian Christians, since the presence of these groups in the country predates Islam, or, reportedly, of citizens who can prove that they or their families were Christian prior to 1979 revolution. The government also recognizes Sabean-Mandaeans as Christian, even though the Sabean-Mandaeans do not consider themselves to be Christians. Any citizen who is not a registered member of one of these three groups or of Judaism or Zoroastrianism or who cannot prove that his or her family was Christian prior to 1979 is considered Muslim. Citizens who are members of one of these recognized religious minorities must register with the authorities.

‘Christian converts are not recognized as Christian under the law; they cannot register, and are not entitled to the same rights as recognized members of Christian communities.’⁶

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⁶ United States Department of State, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2016’, (section 2) 15 August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=268890>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

4. Restrictions on practising Christianity

4.1 Treatment of Christians

4.1.1 The March 2015 Christians in Parliament report on 'The persecution of Christians in Iran' found that:

'Christians continue to be arbitrarily arrested and interrogated because of their faith-related activities. They continue to be treated harshly, with some facing severe physical and psychological torture during periods of detention. The judiciary continues to construe legitimate Christian activities (such as meeting in private homes for prayer meeting and bible studies, or being in contact with Christians outside of Iran) as political activities that threaten the national security of Iran. Therefore, Christians continue to be issued long prison sentences and/or corporal punishment. Churches continue to be pressured into ceasing all services or activities in the national language of Persian (Farsi), or are closed down. Property belonging to Christians has continued to be seized, and Christians continue to face discrimination in the workplace and in educational institutions.

'The panel gathered evidence of continued widespread and targeted persecution of Christians in Iran under Rouhani. The most severe abuse is faced by Christians who have converted from a Muslim background, and those who engage in ministry among Persian-speaking people of a Muslim background. However, restrictions and discrimination are faced by all Christians.

'There continues to be a limit to how high religious minorities can ascend in their careers. The "gozinesh criterion", a selection procedure requiring prospective state officials and employees to demonstrate allegiance to the Islamic Republic of Iran and the state religion, puts a glass ceiling onto the career prospects of religious minorities.'⁷

4.1.2 The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, (the 'USCIRF Annual Report 2017') noted that 'During the year, there was an increase of anti-Christian sentiment in government-controlled and progovernment media outlets, as well as a proliferation of anti-Christian publications online and in print throughout Iran.'⁸

4.1.3 The 2016 USSD IRF report noted that 'The government also continued to regulate Christian religious practices closely to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing and conversion.'⁹

4.1.4 Open Doors, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 8 August 2017, stated that the treatment of ethnic Christians is better than that of Believers from a

⁷ Christians in Parliament, 'The persecution of Christians in Iran', March 2015 <http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

⁸ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 'Annual Report 2017', 26 April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed 29 November 2017

⁹ United States Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016', (section 2) 15 August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=268890>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

Muslim Background (BMB)- the Iranian regime is tolerant of ethnic Christians to a certain extent and uses them to show that there is 'freedom of religion' in the country. There are some ethnic Christian MPs for example, although they are not representative of the people- one Assyrian MP for example gained only 3000 votes¹⁰.

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4.2 Arrests of Christians

4.2.1 For a non-comprehensive list of specific incidents of arrests of Christians see:

- Christian Solidarity Worldwide ([Iran page](#))
- [Mohabat News](#)
- Open Doors ([Iran search](#))
- World Watch Monitor ([Iran page](#))

4.2.2 Open Doors UK reported that 'At least 193 Christians were arrested or imprisoned in Iran in 2016.'¹¹ In its latest 'World Watch List' report covering 2017 it stated that 'at least 52 Christians were arrested' in 2017.¹²

4.2.3 The March 2015 Christians in Parliament report on 'The persecution of Christians in Iran' found that:

'Christians are often arrested in private homes following house raids and taken to detention centres or prison for interrogation.

'When Christians are arrested, often their families and friends are not notified of who has taken them, or where they have gone.

'Interrogations of Christian detainees or prisoners are most often perpetrated by agents of the MOIS. Detainees often endure sessions of interrogation that last many hours, and face regular sessions across many days or weeks, in between which they are generally held in solitary confinement.

'The methods of interrogations in jail have become harsher. In several cases, Christians were seriously physically and mentally abused, including threats of execution.

'The most common form of mistreatment of Christians in prisons and detention centres is psychological. Christians are told that loved ones are sick, that spouses have been unfaithful, or that elderly parents are also imprisoned, to put pressure on the prisoner. Some guards, as well as interrogators, torment prisoners with psychological games.

'Those Christians whose cases are brought to court tend to be convicted on political rather than explicitly religious charges, usually under the vague and often abused 'Security Laws' section of the penal code. Sentences issued to Christians tend to range between one year and eight years.

¹⁰ UK Home Office, Interview with Open Doors, 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

¹¹ Open Doors, 'World watch list- country profiles; Iran', undated <http://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/worldwatch/iran.php>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

'Moharebah is a charge most often used against dissident journalists, political activists and human rights defenders: it is a 'sweeping and aggressive charge', according to Dr. Shaheed, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran. In the aforementioned case, the charges were overturned at appeal. However, there are fears that these serious charges could be applied again to Christians in the future. Christians are not only in danger of facing long prison sentences: they can also face corporal punishment. One known Christian prisoner was sentenced to 70 lashes in December 2014: it is believed the punishment will be carried out when his prison term concludes. Lashes have been meted out in other cases during Rouhani's presidency.

'The Inquiry heard that following release from detention or imprisonment, Christians often continue to be monitored and harassed.

'To avoid serving unjust prison sentences, many Christians and their families flee Iran, meaning that Iran's harsh policies are prompting an exodus of Christians from the country.'¹³

- 4.2.4 A Finnish Immigration Service report on Christian converts in Iran, dated 21 August 2015, citing various sources stated:

'As of 2015, the longest sentences handed down on imprisoned pastors have ranged from six to ten years for crimes related to national security. They have been convicted on political grounds for propaganda against the regime (proselytising), endangering national security (home church activities) and conspiring with enemy states (connections to international Christian organisations). There is no certain information on the number of Christians who have been arrested, because many are afraid to go public after their arrest. According to Christian organisations operating in Iran, the actual numbers are clearly higher than those reported by the media.'¹⁴

- 4.2.5 The National Council of Resistance of Iran, reported in September 2016 that: 'Security forces arrested at least 25 Christians in Southern City of Kerman and transferred them to an unknown location. The human rights websites in Iran reported security guards raided the homes of Christian citizens, searched the houses and confiscated the belongings and at least 25 people were arrested. There has been no information about the reason of arrests and whereabouts of these citizens so far.'¹⁵

¹³ Christians in Parliament, 'The persecution of Christians in Iran', March 2015 <http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

¹⁴ Suuntaus Project, Finnish Immigration Service- Country Information Service, 'Christian Converts in Iran', 21 August 2015 http://www.migri.fi/download/62318_Suuntaus-raportti_Kristityt_kaannynnaiset_IranissaFINALFINAL160915_2_.pdf?dfc90b1525bfd288. Accessed: 29 November 2017

¹⁵ National Council of Resistance of Iran, 'At least 25 Christian citizens were arrested in Kerman', 28 September 2016 <http://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/human-rights/21203-iran-at-least-25-christian-citizens-arrested-in-kerman>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

- 4.2.6 In March 2016, Christian Post reported that: 'The Iranian government labels Christianity as a threat to the nation's Islamic identity and imprisons over 100 Christians for worshipping Christ.'¹⁶
- 4.2.7 In a comment to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) Mr Borji [spokesperson for the Council of United Iranian Churches (HAMGAAM)] stated in September 2016:
- "The crackdown on Protestant Christians in Iran has continued under President Rouhani and in fact has worsened in the last few months. Any gathering of Christians, including social gatherings, such as birthday or engagement parties, is also perceived by Iranian security officials as a potential underground church activity and threat against national security." Mr Borji also pointed out that some of the recently arrested Christians, "including the five arrested in Firouzkooh, are former members of the official churches which were forced to shut down and cease their services in Farsi language.'¹⁷
- 4.2.8 In its February 2016 submission to the UN Human Rights Council the Jubilee Campaign reported that:
- 'Christians who are detained are often not provided due process. They are sometimes held without receiving a lawyer or even a formal charge, and often their sentences are unjustly elongated. It is also very common for Christians to face both physical and psychological torture while detained as an attempt by authorities to get information or confessions out of them. Furthermore, they can be placed in prison alongside criminals who have been arrested for violent crimes, which threatens the Christians' safety. Finally, while some receive basic medical attention, others are completely denied it.'¹⁸

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4.3 Ethnic minority churches

- 4.3.1 In the Country Guidance case of [FS and others \(Iran – Christian Converts\) Iran CG \[2004\] UKIAT 00303](#) the court made the distinction of ethnic Christians who are 'members of ethnic Churches ...do not seek converts and even reject them' and they carry out their worship in a language other than Farsi, compared to 'other Christians who are members of Protestant or evangelical Churches' (para. 152).
- 4.3.2 The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) report published in January 2013 titled 'The cost of faith- Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran' ('the 2013 ICHRI report') noted that:

¹⁶ The Christian Post, 'Over 450,000 Join Iranian House Church Movement, 'Great Number of Muslims Turning to Christ', 3 March 2016
<http://www.christianpost.com/news/over-450000-join-iranian-house-church-movement-great-number-of-muslims-turning-to-christ-158883/print.html>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

¹⁷ Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 'Five Christians arrested at picnic', 19 September 2016
<http://www.csw.org.uk/2016/09/19/news/3258/article.htm>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

¹⁸ Jubilee Campaign, 'Written statement submitted by the Jubilee Campaign, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status', 23 February 2016,
http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1930_1459414617_g1603459.pdf. Accessed 29 November 2017

'Broadly speaking, Iranian Christians can be grouped into two categories: ethnic and non-ethnic. Ethnic Christians include the Armenians and the Assyrians (or Chaldeans), who possess their own linguistic and cultural traditions. Most are members of their community's Orthodox church (the Apostolic Church of Armenia and the Assyrian Church of the East but some are also Catholics or Protestants. Non-ethnic Christians are for the most part members of Protestant churches, and most are converts who once personally identified as Muslim or came from Muslim backgrounds.

'Ethnic denominations are not allowed to hold services in the Persian language and authorities expect them to exclude non Armenians and non-Assyrians from services. Many churches have experienced surveillance or have been forced to report their activities to the government. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has also limited churches' ability to renew their licenses, renovate their houses of worship, buy and sell church-owned property or construct new church buildings.

'Ethnic Christians also are subject to a variety of discriminatory legal provisions that reserve certain ranking public posts such as judges and the president to Muslims, assign non-Muslims harsher punishment for certain crimes, favor Muslim family members in inheritance, and restrict inter-religious marriages.'¹⁹

4.3.3 The March 2015 Christians in Parliament report on 'The persecution of Christians in Iran' noted that:

'Since the 1979 Revolution, the government has not granted a licence for the establishment of a new church organisation or allowed the construction of any church building, Orthodox, Protestant, or other. It has required recognised churches to limit attendance to those who are not from a Muslim background, and to conduct services only in the minority languages of Assyrian or Armenian. Churches have also been closed down, and had leaders arrested, if they refused to comply with these restrictions.'²⁰

4.3.4 A Finnish Immigration Service report on Christian converts in Iran, dated 21 August 2015, citing various sources stated:

'The Ministry of Culture is responsible for the monitoring of all religious organisations: Official churches must report any new members joining their congregation, and their personal information is sent to the ministry. Authorities also check the identity of churchgoers in front of the places of worship before services. As a result of this pressure, official churches have discontinued baptising people outside their congregations. Since around 2006–2007, no Christian converts have been baptised in Iran.'²¹

¹⁹ International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 'The Cost of Faith – Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran', 16 January 2013, https://www.iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/Christians_report_Final_for-web.pdf. Accessed: 29 November 2017

²⁰ Christians in Parliament, 'The persecution of Christians in Iran', March 2015 <http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

²¹ Suuntaus Project, Finnish Immigration Service- Country Information Service, 'Christian Converts in Iran', 21 August 2015 [http://www.migri.fi/download/62318_Suuntaus-
raportti_Kristityt_kaannynnaiset_IranissaFINALFINAL160915_2_.pdf?dfc90b1525bfd288](http://www.migri.fi/download/62318_Suuntaus-raportti_Kristityt_kaannynnaiset_IranissaFINALFINAL160915_2_.pdf?dfc90b1525bfd288). Accessed: 29 November 2017

4.4 Evangelical Protestant churches

4.4.1 The 2013 ICHRI report noted that:

'The World Christian Database (WCD) in 2010 reported approximately 66,700 Protestant Christians in Iran, which represents about 25 percent of the Iranian Christian community.

'Theoretically, Protestants, along with Armenians and Assyrians, are among the Christians recognized in the Islamic Republic's constitution. In practice, however, they have been persecuted and discriminated against, and have faced significantly more aggressive government restrictions and human rights abuses than ethnic Christian groups.'²²

4.4.2 The 2016 USSD IRF report noted that:

'Christians, particularly evangelicals and converts from Islam, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and detention, and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to reports from exiled Christians. Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year's end on charges related to their religious practices. Prison authorities reportedly continued to withhold medical care from prisoners, including some Christians, according to human rights groups. According to human rights NGOs, the government also continued to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing.

'The authorities prevented Muslim converts to Christianity from entering Armenian or Assyrian churches, according to UN Special Rapporteur Shaheed. According to Christian community leaders, if the authorities found Armenian or Assyrian churches were baptizing new converts or preaching in Farsi, they closed the churches. The authorities reportedly also barred all unregistered or unrecognized Christians from entering church premises, closed churches that allowed them to enter, and arrested Christian converts. Christian advocacy groups stated the government, through such pressure and through church closures, had eliminated in recent years all but a handful of Farsi-language church services, restricting services to the Armenian and Assyrian languages. The government continued to ban Farsi-language churches, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide.'²³

4.5 House churches

4.5.1 The ICHRI report published in January 2013 noted that:

'Space limitations as well as the government's constraints on churches and its policies against conversion led many Protestants to form house churches, which are informal, unofficial (i.e. not recognized by the state) churches in

²² International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, 'The Cost of Faith – Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran', 16 January 2013, https://www.iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/Christians_report_Final_for-web.pdf. Accessed: 29 November 2017

²³ United States Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016', (section 2) 15 August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=268890>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

private residences across the country where new Christians could gather, worship and proselytize.

‘These underground churches became a place not only for converts, restricted from attending registered churches, to practice their new faith, but also a place where Iranians interested in Christianity could go to learn about the religion.

‘Over the last few years, state officials and clerics who influence state policy have increasingly spoken out against the growth of evangelicalism and house churches, articulating a rationale for state repression. Since Iran’s constitution recognizes Christians as a religious minority with certain rights, and Christians are afforded certain protections under traditional Islamic jurisprudence as a “people of the book,” Iranian officials and clerics try to differentiate evangelicals and house churches from Christianity. They claim that evangelicals and house churches are a deviant form of Christianity, different from state-recognized Christianity.’²⁴

- 4.5.2 In March 2016 Christian Post reported that: ‘Such crackdowns on faith, however, have not prevented Iranian house churches from blossoming into a movement too big for the Iranian religious police to contain.’²⁵
- 4.5.3 The 2016 USSD IRF report noted that official reports and the media continued to characterize Christian house churches as ‘illegal networks’ and ‘Zionist propaganda institutions.’²⁶
- 4.5.4 The USCIRF Annual Report 2017 stated that, ‘Christian leaders of house churches were the particular focus of Iranian authorities, and often were charged with unfounded national-security-related crimes.’²⁷
- 4.5.5 The ACCORD query response on ‘Iran: House churches; situation of practising Christians; treatment by authorities of Christian converts family members’ dated March 2017 quoted an email response from a representative of Elam Ministries and provided the following comments on the structure of house churches in Iran:

‘[D]ue to the underground nature of these house churches, the structure is not uniform across the country. Some house churches are very informal and are simply a gathering of close family and friends on a regular or semi-regular basis for prayer, worship and bible reading. These may be very small groups (a couple of people, for example) or larger (a couple of dozen or more perhaps). Often house churches grow organically as new Christians share their new faith with family and friends. Many house churches will have

²⁴ International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, ‘The Cost of Faith – Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran’, 16 January 2013, https://www.iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/Christians_report_Final_for-web.pdf. Accessed: 29 November 2017

²⁵ Christian Post, ‘Over 450,000 Join Iranian House Church Movement, ‘Great Number of Muslims Turning to Christ’ 3 March 2016, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/over-450000-join-iranian-house-church-movement-great-number-of-muslims-turning-to-christ-158883/>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

²⁶ United States Department of State, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2016’, (section 2) 15 August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=268890>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

²⁷ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, ‘Annual Report 2017’, 26 April 2017, <http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Accessed 29 November 2017

no formal links with any other Christian groups. However, some house churches are part of house church 'networks' within a particular city or area, or some networks even span across a number of cities.

'Some house churches have leaders who have been able to receive training and teaching from Christian ministries (either online or in person through residential courses provided outside of Iran), whilst other house church leaders may have had no opportunity to receive training at all. An increasing number of house churches have 'internet pastors': where the pastor has had to flee the country due to persecution, they may continue to lead the church remotely via the internet.

'However, the pressure and persecution on house churches in Iran means there are an increasing number of isolated Christians in Iran: Christians who do not have regular contact with other Christians. In most cases, these isolated Christians mostly receive their teaching via Christian TV programmes, which they can access by satellite. They may also receive teaching and encouragement and a form of fellowship via the internet.'²⁸

- 4.5.6 Article 18 told the UK Home Office, in an interview on 12 July 2017, that house churches are officially labelled as 'illegal'. They went on to say that: House churches were formed as a result of increased restrictions on official churches. As more churches were forced to shut down people began to meet in secret. But religious intolerance, goes beyond house church activity. Any official church that offers literature, services, training in Farsi is treated as a potential threat. The analysis that is often offered in pro- IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) website is that house churches are an extension of the Protestant churches and are empowered by them, so they are seen as a single problem²⁹.
- 4.5.7 When asked about if there was any difference in treatment between Church 'leaders' and others and what constitutes a 'leader' within the Church, Open Doors told the UK Home Office that there is some difference in treatment, depending on the person's role, between Christians. Christian leaders are monitored very closely, but the Iranian authorities have a problem with all Christians, and mainly Farsi-speaking Christians, ethnic Christians and Believers from a Muslim Background (BMB). A person organising/arranging a House Church, even if it only consists of 4 or 5 people, can be thought of as a 'leader', as can anyone who takes on any role or responsibility, for example the leadership of women's ministry. A leader is not just someone who has studied theology. For example, a person who has come to Christ (through conversion), say six months ago, will be evangelising and starting discipleship groups³⁰.
- 4.5.8 Elam Ministries, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 6 September 2017, stated that the police are not normally involved in intelligence gathering; they

²⁸ ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation 'Iran: House churches; situation of practising Christians; treatment by authorities of Christian converts family members- Query Response', 14 June 2017, https://www.ecoi.net/local_link/342012/472687_en.html. Accessed: 13 December 2017.

²⁹ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18', 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

³⁰ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Open Doors', 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

just take orders. Information is gathered by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Raiders of house churches are normally agents of the MOIS. Those arrested are normally taken to a police station run by the Revolutionary Guard³¹.

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5. Christian converts

5.1 Treatment

5.1.1 The March 2015 Christians in Parliament report on 'The persecution of Christians in Iran' found that:

'The most severe abuse is faced by Christians who have converted from a Muslim background, and those who engage in ministry among Persian-speaking people of a Muslim background.

'Christian converts in Iran - and any Christians who minister among individuals from a Muslim background - know they are either already being monitored by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), or that MOIS may identify them and begin monitoring at any time.

'Converts to Christianity have additional battles to face in daily life. Most converts still have names that identify them as having a Muslim heritage. Given that conversion is not tolerated, these individuals are still viewed and treated as Muslim in Iranian law and bureaucracy.

'Furthermore, conversion away from Islam can lead to the loss of a job in state institutions, or in cases where the employer does not tolerate conversion.

'With regards to education, according to Dr Shaheed, University regulations continue to officially grant admission only to Muslims or members of officially recognized minority religions. Christian converts and unrecognised religious minorities can face pressure within academic institutions; or lose opportunities for education or the right to complete educational courses because of their faith.'³²

5.1.2 Human Rights Watch world report 2017, covering events in 2016 (HRW's 2017 report) noted that 'Security forces also continued to target Christian converts of Muslim heritage, as well as members of the "house church" movement who gather to worship in private homes.'³³

5.1.3 Amnesty International's annual report for 2016/17 noted that:

'Members of religious minorities, including [...] Christian converts [...] faced discrimination in law and practice, including in education, employment and inheritance, and were persecuted for practicing their faith. The authorities

³¹ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Elam Ministries', 6 September 2017. Copy available on request

³² Christians in Parliament, 'The persecution of Christians in Iran', March 2015 <http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

³³ Human Rights Watch, 'World Report 2017', 12 January 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/iran>. Accessed: 4 December 2017

detained tens of Christian converts after raiding house churches where they peacefully gathered to worship.’³⁴

- 5.1.4 In her March 2017 report to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Asma Jahangir, expressed her concern with regard to the “targeting and harsh treatment” of religious minorities including Christian converts from Islam whose faiths are considered as “deviant” by the authorities and parts of the clerus. The situation of these religious groups is described as follows:
- ‘These groups continue to face arbitrary arrest, harassment and detention, and are often accused of national security crimes such as “acting against the national security” or “propaganda against the state.” Under Iranian law, individuals, including Christians of Muslim backgrounds, can be prosecuted for the crime of apostasy although the crime is not specifically codified as a crime in the Islamic Penal Code. The Special Rapporteur notes that apostasy laws clearly contravene Iran’s obligation to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief.’³⁵
- 5.1.5 Freedom House, in its ‘Freedom in the World 2017’ report, (the 2017 Freedom House report) noted that ‘There is an ongoing crackdown on Christian converts. In the past several years, a number of informal house churches have been raided and their pastors detained.’³⁶
- 5.1.6 The USCIRF Annual Report 2017 noted that ‘Over the past year, there were numerous incidents of Iranian authorities raiding church services, threatening church members, and arresting and imprisoning worshipers and church leaders, particularly Evangelical Christian converts.’³⁷
- 5.1.7 The 2016 USSD IRF report noted that:
- ‘Muslim converts to Christianity reportedly continued to face harassment, arrest, and detention.
- ‘Security officials monitored registered congregation centers to perform identity checks on worshippers to confirm non-Christians or converts did not participate in services. In response, many citizens who had converted to Protestantism or other Christian faiths practiced their religion in secret.’³⁸
- 5.1.8 Open Doors informed the UK Home Office on 8 August 2017 that the Revolutionary Guard and the intelligence services are mainly responsible for the ill treatment of Christians in Iran. Both are very much controlled. These

³⁴ Amnesty International, ‘Amnesty International Report 2016/17’, 22 February 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/>. Accessed 29 November 2017

³⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 6 March 2017, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58bd7e2b4.html>. Accessed 13 December 2017

³⁶ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2017, 15 April 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/iran>. Accessed: 4 December 2017

³⁷ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, ‘Annual Report 2017’, 26 April 2017, http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017_USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf. Accessed 4 December 2017

³⁸ United States Department of State, ‘International Religious Freedom Report for 2016’, (section 2) 15 August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=268890>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

organisations often interview Christians, who are believed to be spies from the West. Additional charges are loaded onto Christians when arrested. There is a clear structure to how the authorities persecute Christians³⁹.

- 5.1.9 Elam ministries, informed the UK Home Office on 6 September 2017 that those who store and distribute Bibles, evangelise, lead house churches etc, face more pressure from the authorities. The authorities might let them carry on for a while or watch them but their goal would be to stop them⁴⁰.
- 5.1.10 When asked by the UK Office about the likely treatment Christian converts may face Elam Ministries stated that the pressure will be built up - they might get called in for questioning and then let go at first. If a person doesn't stop their Christian worship, then the phone calls will start. Depending on how much information the authorities have on a person, the strategy may change, with arrests without warrants, huge bails, charges of politically-related or security crimes, floggings and exiles to remote areas of Iran. Within the last ten years, thousands of Iranians have converted to Christianity. In this time the Iranian authorities have arrested hundreds of people and built up a good database of activities and developed an idea of the different levels of activity. Those who watch satellite TV are considered a lower threat; those who open a house church or evangelise are in a different category⁴¹.
- 5.1.11 Elam Ministries further stated that there are so many converts now, the authorities cannot keep tabs on all of them. The strategy is to put pressure on them; scare them into leaving as refugees. This is a particular conscious strategy in the provinces. Once a person leaves they will be unable to come back⁴².

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5.2 Activities which attract attention from the authorities

- 5.2.1 When asked by the UK Home Office what attracts the authorities to new converts and what kind of activities would therefore lead to ill treatment Open Doors and Article 18 suggested the following would, although these can depend on the city:
- Any kind of gathering
 - Sharing the gospel
 - Being in possession of more than one Bible (usually one Bible will be tolerated by the authorities, but not always)
 - Possession of a library of Christian literature
 - Holding discipleship classes
 - Studying theology
 - Contact with Christian organisations

³⁹ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Open Doors', 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

⁴⁰ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Elam Ministries', 6 September 2017. Copy available on request.

⁴¹ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Elam Ministries', 6 September 2017. Copy available on request.

⁴² UK Home Office, 'Interview with Elam Ministries', 6 September 2017. Copy available on request

- Attending Christian conferences and seminars inside the country or abroad where teaching takes place
 - Hosting or, in some cases, even attending house churches^{43 44}.
- 5.2.2 Article 18, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 12 July 2017, stated that people in Turkey have said that, they have been told by Iranian interrogators that they don't have a problem if a person confines their beliefs to themselves and pray and believe whatever they wish to believe privately. But the moment they appear to be speaking to others about Christianity, or express their beliefs in the form of worship with others [publicly, like in a house church] "then we have a problem"⁴⁵.
- 5.2.3 Article 18 stated that there seems to be some profiling when the authorities round up Christians. The authorities look for the more active evangelisers, or those with the potential to be more active. It also depends on the arresting authority. There are parallel intelligence agencies with each apparently following a different set of protocols⁴⁶.
- 5.2.4 When asked how the authorities come to learn about people's activities, Article 18 told the UK Home Office that Iran has national ID numbers for its citizens and intelligence gathering has become more centralised. Whatever you do open a bank account, buy a plane ticket, post a parcel, buy a mobile phone SIM card or a bus ticket - you need to use that number. In some rare instances, neighbours also inform the authorities when there are suspicious activities in their neighbourhood. The police then phone the intelligence service to deal with the case if it involves Christian house church activity. Other times, they monitor activities of some Christians. They pick up one person, collect tablets, phones, laptops etc. they look for contacts, pictures and try to establish connections⁴⁷.
- 5.2.5 Article 18 further stated the old Home Office indicator that an "Iranian Christian may be at risk of religious persecution if they are leaders" or, for example, "wearing a cross", is redundant. But there is also the case that Iranian authorities can't detain/imprison them all. They prioritise. For example, if 50 people are arrested, the authorities may pick four to detain and may return for others later. There is also the potential for financial gain. Article 18 had heard of several cases, independently of each other, where the person is arrested. They deposit [c.\$30,000, \$60k, \$90k) as bail. They are then coerced to leave the country by the authorities – sometimes aiding through the airport – and when they do, they then forfeit their bail. The money goes to the state⁴⁸.
- 5.2.6 Asked whether conversions take place inside or outside of Iran Article 18 told the UK Home Office that both occurred. Head knowledge (knowledge of the bible etc) is not a sign of being a Christian. Lifestyle choices need to be witnessed over a period (somethings take 7-8 months to start appearing), so

⁴³ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Open Doors', 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

⁴⁴ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18', 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

⁴⁵ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18', 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

⁴⁶ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18', 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

⁴⁷ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18', 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

⁴⁸ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18', 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

it is not possible to say if a person has converted to Christianity the moment they arrive in the UK. A person's understanding of basic doctrines is different coming from a Muslim background and it will take some time to process them. But they can still be genuinely converted while processing it rationally⁴⁹.

- 5.2.7 When asked about the extent satellite TV and internet play in Christian teachings Article 18 told the UK Home Office that the government has invested heavily in blocking internet sites, but satellite TV plays a side role to the internet. There are currently about four 24 hour Christian satellite channels in Farsi (three from the United States and one from Cyprus). There are more channels in English. People aren't allowed to have a satellite dish or receiver in their home; but there is a difference between not being allowed and not having. Asked whether the government has linked watching the satellite TV to religious activities Article 18 told the UK Home Office that it hasn't really linked the two. The government may think satellite TV could be a tool for evangelistic purposes. But watching Satellite TV is not their major concern. It became a concern to them when those converts then begin to form fellowships with other Christians perhaps in house churches. Sometimes people are cautioned by security agencies for contacting – or in some cases even charged with collaborating - with these channels⁵⁰.

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5.3 Arrests of converts

- 5.3.1 For a non-comprehensive list of specific incidents of arrests of Christians converts see:
- Christian Solidarity Worldwide ([Iran page](#))
 - [Mohabat News](#)
 - Open Doors ([Iran search](#))
 - World Watch Monitor ([Iran page](#))
- 5.3.2 The March 2015 Christians in Parliament report on 'The persecution of Christians in Iran' found that 'Whenever any convert to Christianity is arrested, pressure is put on them to persuade them to return to Islam during interrogation and throughout their time in detention.'⁵¹
- 5.3.3 The UN General Assembly report on the Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, dated 30 September 2016, noted that:
- 'Reports indicate that members of religious minorities continue to face severe restrictions. Adherents of recognized religions, such as Christians (especially those of Muslim background), [...], continue to suffer discrimination and are reportedly prosecuted for peacefully manifesting their religious beliefs. In its response, the Government rejects allegations

⁴⁹ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18', 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

⁵⁰ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18', 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

⁵¹ Christians in Parliament, 'The persecution of Christians in Iran', March 2015 <http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

regarding restrictions on religious minorities, including Christians, and maintains that “house churches” are engaged in illegal activities because they do not secure the relevant permits from government officials. It also notes that the needs of the country’s Christians are met and therefore there is no “need to establish or create new churches, including house churches”.⁵²

- 5.3.4 The Human Rights Activists News Agency article ‘Increasing Pressure on Christians in Iran’ dated 22 September 2016 noted that, ‘On 12 August 2016...Seven Christian converts [...] who had gone to Firoozkooh with their families were detained by the Intelligence Ministry. Two of these citizens were released immediately but the whereabouts and condition of five others are unknown so far.’⁵³
- 5.3.5 Christian Today reported in October 2016 that:
‘Three Iranian men who converted to Christianity from Islam are appealing against criminal convictions for drinking alcohol. Yasser Mossayebzadeh, Saheb Fadaie and Mohammad Reza Omid were sentenced to 80 lashes for taking communion wine. Non-Muslims are allowed to drink alcohol in Iran. But because conversion to Christianity from Islam is forbidden and regarded as apostasy, the three men are still legally regarded as Muslims. The third man, Omid, already has a previous conviction for drinking alcohol. If he is convicted a third time, he is likely to face the death sentence. World Watch Monitor reports that the three men have also been charged with acting against national security.’⁵⁴
- 5.3.6 The USCIRF Annual Report 2017 noted that ‘According to reports, nearly 80 Christians were arrested between May and August 2016; the majority were interrogated and released within days, but some were held without charge for months, and several remain in detention. As of December 2016, approximately 90 Christians were in prison, detained, or awaiting trial because of their religious beliefs and activities.’⁵⁵
- 5.3.7 The 2016 USSD IRF report noted that:
- 5.3.8 ‘Christians, particularly evangelicals and converts from Islam, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrests and detention, and high levels of harassment and surveillance, according to reports from exiled Christians. Numerous Christians remained imprisoned at year’s end on charges related to their religious practices. Prison authorities reportedly continued to withhold medical care from prisoners, including some Christians, according to human

⁵² UN General Assembly, Report on the Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran’, 30 September 2016 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N16/304/01/PDF/N1630401.pdf?OpenElement>. Accessed: 4 December 2017

⁵³ Human Rights Activists News Agency, ‘Increasing Pressure on Christians in Iran’, 22 September 2016 <https://hra-news.org/en/increasing-pressure-christians-iran>. Accessed: 4 December 2017

⁵⁴ Christian Today, ‘Christian Converts In Iran Appeal 80 Lash Sentence For Taking Holy Communion’, 11 October 2016 <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/christian.converts.in.iran.appeal.80.lash.sentence.for.taking.holy communion/97664.htm>. Accessed: 4 December 2017

⁵⁵ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, ‘Annual Report 2017’, 26 April 2017, http://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2017_USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf. Accessed 4 December 2017

rights groups. According to human rights NGOs, the government also continued to enforce the prohibition on proselytizing.⁵⁶

- 5.3.9 Article 18, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 12 July 2017 stated that apostasy charges are rarely stated on court documents although individuals are verbally charged, questioned, intimidated and threatened with apostasy⁵⁷.
- 5.3.10 Article 18, further stated that legally a person must be summonsed first and then arrested (if a person has not responded to the summons). But this usually doesn't happen. Often when a person is arrested, no one shows an arrest warrant which legally should have their name, basic details and the reason for arrest. The person should then know his/her charges immediately and before interrogations. The person could then refuse to answer questions not connected to his/her under law. But this rarely happens. The arrest, detention and charge are therefore illegal all the way through. It's also highly likely that by the time a person gets to court, the charges which are raised are not the ones mentioned (if at all) earlier in proceedings. People who are arrested are threatened with apostasy. But this doesn't appear on the charge sheet or court verdicts⁵⁸.
- 5.3.11 Article 18 stated that some people are detained for three months and one day – to ensure they have a criminal record. Another trend, on top of the person's sentence is two years' 'exile' to a place in southern Iran which is difficult to live in. People sent there also must report weekly to the authorities⁵⁹.
- 5.3.12 Open Doors, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 8 August 2017 stated that almost all those who are arrested are arrested for actions against 'national security', which is very broad. These arrests are unlawful. 'National security' is the reason given for arrests; people are not arrested for apostasy. Although apostasy is punishable by death in Iran, the Islamic Republic has never codified the crime of apostasy. Instead, relying on the Iranian Constitution, the Islamic Penal Code authorises the enforcement of certain Islamic laws known as hodud crimes even when the crime is not specifically mentioned in the criminal code⁶⁰.
- 5.3.13 Open Doors further stated that for those arrested bail is high. Otherwise a person will receive a suspended sentence. The Iranian regime put pressure on active Christians who are arrested for their house church or evangelistic activities to leave the country and forfeit their bail. From the regime's point of view the active Christians are less dangerous when they are outside the country⁶¹.
- 5.3.14 Elam ministries, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 6 September 2017, stated that when the authorities raid a house church they will arrest everyone

⁵⁶ United States Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016', (section 2) 15 August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=268890>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

⁵⁷ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18, 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

⁵⁸ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18, 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

⁵⁹ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Article 18', 12 July 2017. Copy available on request.

⁶⁰ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Open Doors, 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

⁶¹ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Open Doors, 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

in the room. They might not hold those who are new or who are clearly not active as long as they would hold the leaders. House churches are much smaller now than before. Two to three years ago there would have been 20-30 members. Leaders have been arrested which means that other members of the group have to step up and become the leaders. There is not a set structure - the situation is very fluid. Those in House churches are threatened by the government as they are seen as the most passionate evangelists⁶².

- 5.3.15 World Watch Monitor noted on its Iran country webpage that ‘in 2017 over a dozen Christians – most of them converts to Christianity – were given prison sentences of between 10 and 15 years for “acting against national security”. According to religious freedom watchdog Article 18, such political charges attempt “to avoid international outcry at religiously motivated charges”.’⁶³
- 5.3.16 In October 2017 Mohabat News reported that ‘Iranian security authorities summoned a Christian convert in the south-western city of Dezful and arrested him in the Ministry of Intelligence office.’ and that ‘Three other Christians have been arrested in Dezful recently. [they had ...] obtained confirmed reports of them being beaten in prison and threatened that if they don’t renounce their faith in Christ and turn away from their Christian faith they will be forced to leave the country or be beaten to death.’⁶⁴
- 5.3.17 In December 2017 Mohabat News reported that ‘Four Iranian converts to Christianity have been arrested in the city of Karaj, Alborz province.’⁶⁵

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5.4 Societal treatment of converts

- 5.4.1 A Finnish Immigration Service report on Christian converts in Iran, dated 21 August 2015, citing various sources stated:
- ‘The law does not offer protection for people who have publicly relinquished Islam, which puts them in a vulnerable position with the authorities. According to many religious scholars – including Ayatollah Khomeini – killing an apostate or a blasphemer without trial is allowed. The Criminal Code of Iran protects a person who has killed a perpetrator of one of the most serious crimes from the most severe qesas retribution punishments.
- ‘Converts from religious families may face trouble with their own relatives, if their relatives be-come aware of the conversion. Those living in religious neighbourhoods may also become the target of their neighbours’ attention if they do not visit the mosque and participate in other Muslim religious practices. Converts with relatives working in government jobs may be subjected to pressure, as the family members are afraid of losing their reputation or post. For reasons of greed, or, for instance, child custody

⁶² UK Home Office, ‘Interview with Elam Ministries’, 6 September 2017. Copy available on request.

⁶³ World Watch Monitor, Iran Undated, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iran/>. Accessed: 29 January 2018

⁶⁴ Mohabat News, ‘Another Christian Convert Arrested in South-Western Iran’, 23 October 2017, <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=3774>. Accessed: 29 January 2018

⁶⁵ Mohabat News, ‘Houses of Six Christian Converts Raided, Four Detained Before Christmas’, 17 December 2017, <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=3813>. Accessed: 29 January 2018

issues, relatives may also turn in their family member who has converted to Christianity to the police because, according to Iranian law, no-one except another Muslim may inherit a Muslim or raise a Muslim child.’⁶⁶

- 5.4.2 Elam Ministries, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 6 September 2017, stated that even where a Christian person is at a lower risk they may still face difficulties navigating everyday life in Iran. There is a lot of bureaucracy and all official documents and application forms that need to be completed will ask for a person’s religion. Identity cards are needed for many things such as opening bank accounts, getting a passport, renting a car and buying a house. If a person’s Christianity is seen on official documents then they may face difficulties. When asked to describe what kind of difficulties they may face Elam ministries stated that they may be refused admission to University, or the right to graduate. They may be refused permission to marry in officially registered Christian churches. They may face pressure in renewing their passports, buying a car (where you need to sign paperwork), they may face difficulties with interactions with landlords, with schools or their job. The difficulties can arise from anywhere where a person is confronted by an official or person who could cause trouble by reporting them. Some pressure may even encourage Iranians to leave the country⁶⁷.

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6. Treatment of family members

- 6.1.1 A Danish Immigration Service update on the situation for Christian converts in Iran, June 2014, citing various sources, stated that:

‘... many pastors are forced to leave Iran as they are pressured by the authorities through threats to family members, for example kidnapping of family members, rape of their daughters and similar violence.

‘Regarding whether family members to a convert may face consequences due to their family member’s conversion, Amnesty International’s International Secretariat (AIS) considered that it could depend on whether or not a family member is actively campaigning for their relatives who have converted. [...] AIS, has over the years, recorded many cases of harassment and intimidation of family members in order to stop them from campaigning. [...] There also have been cases of family members who have been arrested and tortured or otherwise ill-treated in order to pressure individuals to make “confessions” to certain charges, however, AIS did not have information on specific cases regarding converts where this had happened.

‘However, the same report stated that the greatest threat to the convert was the Iranian authorities, and that often, even where the family disapproved of the conversion, relatives took no action against the convert.

⁶⁶ Suuntaus Project, Finnish Immigration Service- Country Information Service, ‘Christian Converts in Iran’, 21 August 2015 http://www.migri.fi/download/62318_Suuntaus-raportti_Kristityt_kaannynnaiset_IranissaFINALFINAL160915_2_.pdf?dfc90b1525bfd288. Accessed: 29 November 2017

⁶⁷ UK Home Office, ‘Interview with Elam Ministries’, 6 September 2017. Copy available on request

'Elam Ministries (Christian group) another respondent in the above report, stated that: '...many families in Iran do not necessarily follow Islamic practices. Some are quite anti-Islamic, while others may be very pro-Islamic.....Parents may for example pressure their children to stop their move towards Christianity out of fear of the system (authorities).

'Representatives of the Union Church informed the delegation (for the above report) that in relation to family and social network, the consequences of a conversion are often that the immediate family members create the biggest problems for the convert, because they consider that the convert has shamed the family.'⁶⁸

6.1.2 The Christians in Parliament report titled 'The Persecution of Christians in Iran' dated March 2015 noted:

'Often the MOIS [Ministry of Intelligence and Security] particularly target Christian leaders, but family members of the individual can also find themselves targeted for harassment. For example, threats were faced for many years by a Christian internet pastor called Farhad, according to Elam Ministries. Farhad had learnt that the MOIS knew about his involvement in the distribution of Christian scriptures and books, which would provoke a harsh punishment. After a Christian friend of his was arrested and interrogated, Farhad feared he too would soon be arrested, and he decided to leave Iran. Following Farhad's departure, Farhad's elderly mother, and his sister and brother-in-law have continued to face threats on an almost daily basis. They have also had to relocate to another city because agents of MOIS informed the local community that they are 'apostates' from Islam.

'Church members are also often subject to harassment following the arrest of their leader.'⁶⁹

6.1.1 The ACCORD query response dated March 2017 quoted an email response from a representative of Elam Ministries and provided the following comments with regard to the treatment of family members of Christian converts by state authorities:

'We can certainly confirm that family members of Christians (especially Christian converts) are not spared suffering. For example, in one case of a house raid and arrest of a Christian couple perpetrated by Iran's Ministry of Intelligence (MOI) in July 2014, the 12-year old son of the couple was at home during the house raid. He was hit by the officers while being questioned about his own faith. He was also arrested along with his parents. Further, we have heard examples of elderly parents being harassed regarding their child's conversion to Christianity.'⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Danish Immigration Service, 'Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran: Report from the Danish Immigration Service's Fact-Finding Mission to Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey and London, United Kingdom 25 March to 2 April 2014 and 10 April to 11 April 2014. June 2014 <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/ronlyres/78D46647-A0AD-4B36-BE0A-C32FEC4947EF/0/RapportIranFFM10062014II.pdf>. Accessed: 4 December 2017

⁶⁹ Christians in Parliament, 'The persecution of Christians in Iran', March 2015 <http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf>. Accessed: 29 November 2017

⁷⁰ ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation

- 6.1.2 The March 2017 email response by Elam Ministries with ACCORD notes that family members of imprisoned Christians are also affected in ways other than direct actions by state actors:

“Of course the family members of those in prison for their faith suffer deeply through loss of their loved one. For example, Pastor Farshid Fathi was in prison for 5 years between 2010 and 2015. His son was about 1 years old when his father was imprisoned for his faith. He was without his father for over 5 years and had no memory of his father when he was finally released. Many families also suffer financially when the primary breadwinner is imprisoned. For example, Ebrahim Firouzi is currently imprisoned for his faith in Rajai Shahr prison (Karaj) and his sister and mother are struggling financially because he was the primary breadwinner for the family. Families suffer severely financially in other ways. Extortionate bail sums are demanded for the temporary release of Christian detainees. Often family house deeds or family business permits are submitted to cover this bail demand. If the Christian flees the country before their court hearing, the bail is lost to the family. Moreover, inheritance laws in Iran mean that Christian family members cannot inherit money from relatives. Muslim family members are always preferred to receive the inheritance. There are many other ways that family members suffer because of the conversion of an individual.” (Elam Ministries, 28 March 2017).⁷¹

- 6.1.3 Open Doors, interviewed by the UK Home Office on 8 August 2017, stated that it’s often reported by the Christians who have fled the country that their families are targets of harassment to force them to cut their continuing connection with house church members and active Christians inside Iran⁷².

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7. Converting aboard

- 7.1.1 The Guardian reported in June 2016 that:

‘European churches say growing flock of Muslim refugees are converting A growing number of Muslim refugees in Europe are converting to Christianity, according to churches, which have conducted mass baptisms in some places.

‘Reliable data on conversions is not available but anecdotal evidence suggests a pattern of rising church attendance by Muslims who have fled conflict, repression and economic hardship in countries across the Middle East and central Asia. Complex factors behind the trend include heartfelt faith in a new religion, gratitude to Christian groups offering support during perilous and frightening journeys, and an expectation that conversion may aid asylum applications

‘Iran: House churches; situation of practising Christians; treatment by authorities of Christian converts family members- Query Response’, 14 June 2017, https://www.ecoi.net/local_link/342012/472687_en.html. Accessed: 13 December 2017.

⁷¹ ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation ‘Iran: House churches; situation of practising Christians; treatment by authorities of Christian converts family members- Query Response’, 14 June 2017, https://www.ecoi.net/local_link/342012/472687_en.html. Accessed: 13 December 2017.

⁷² UK Home Office, ‘Interview with Open Doors’, 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

'At Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral in the UK, a weekly Persian service attracts between 100 and 140 people. Nearly all are migrants from Iran, Afghanistan and elsewhere in central Asia. One in four confirmations conducted by the bishop of Bradford, Toby Howarth, over the past year were of converts from Islam. Most were Iranian and most of those were asylum seekers.

'[...] At Liverpool Cathedral, there is an established process. People are registered when they first come to church in case evidence of attendance is needed for an asylum application. That may be followed by five sessions of baptism preparation and 12 sessions of confirmation preparation. "This way we get to know them and see how they're involved in the life of the church," said Eghtedarian [Mohammad Eghtedarian, a curate at Liverpool Cathedral and a refugee from Iran who converted to Christianity and was later ordained.] If necessary the church will provide a "letter of attendance" for the immigration authorities and support them through the appeals process.

'Asked if some people pretended to convert to Christianity in order to help their asylum applications, Eghtedarian said: "Yes, of course. Plenty of people. I do understand there are a lot of mixed motives. There are many people abusing the system – I'm not ashamed of saying that. But is it the person's fault or the system's fault? And who are they deceiving? The Home Office, me as a pastor, or God?"⁷³

7.1.2 World Watch Monitor noted in July 2017 that:

'Thousands of Iranian asylum-seekers across Europe are turning to Christianity, though observers are not convinced that all claims of conversion are genuine. A BBC documentary, 'Praying for Asylum', tells the story of a number of Iranian asylum-seekers in the Netherlands who say they have become Christians and would be exposed to persecution if they were deported.

'Iranian-born church leader Masoud Mohammad Amin, who founded Cyrus Church, one of largest Iranian churches in Europe, said he had baptized thousands of Iranians, from the streets of Paris to Turkey. [...] He said the church, in the Dutch city of Harderwijk, has been so successful that "8,000 people in the Netherlands and 8,000 people outside the country have been baptized".

'However, a Dutch pastor interviewed, Gijs van den Brink, who baptizes around 25 people a year, said he had been approached by some people whose motives he doubted. He said that if someone asks to be baptized on his first visit to his church, which is east of Utrecht, "then I know enough; I know that he has a case and that he is searching for baptism ... and I explain [to] him that it will not help him ... because our government is not mad: they can easily come to know if you are a real believer or not... We're not a group who is helping refugees to get asylum here."⁷⁴

⁷³ The Guardian, 'European churches say growing flock of Muslim refugees are converting', 5 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/05/european-churches-growing-flock-muslim-refugees-converting-christianity>. Accessed: 7 February 2018

⁷⁴ World Watch Monitor, "Thousands' of Iranians claiming asylum in Europe as converts to

7.1.3 The Independent reported in December 2016 that:

‘More and more refugees are converting from Islam to Christianity as they settle in Germany, churches have said. [...] Some of the new converts were first introduced to Christianity in Germany or en route to Europe, while others had previously attempted to follow the religion in countries like Iran, where the faith is restricted or persecuted.

‘There is concern that some conversions could be motivated by the belief that it will increase the chance of being granted asylum in Germany, where Christianity is the dominant religion.’⁷⁵

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8. Treatment of returnees

8.1.1 A Danish Immigration Service update on the situation for Christian converts in Iran, June 2014, citing various sources stated that:

‘With regard to the situation of converts who return to Iran after being baptized abroad, be it in Turkey, Armenia, UAE or another country, the source found that they may return to Iran quietly and not encounter any problems. If the person is already monitored by the authorities, he or she could risk consequences upon return to Iran.

‘According to AIIS [Amnesty International's International Secretariat] it is difficult to obtain information on potential risks an individual may face upon returning to Iran after conversion abroad. If Iranian informants have gathered information regarding an individual who has returned to Iran, the authorities may arrest them for questioning. It is possible that charging and conviction will ensue the arrest and questioning. A wide group of people could be in that position: students, political activists, family members of political persons might even be questioned as well as Christian converts.

‘Regarding whether baptism abroad would put a person at risk from the authorities in Iran, AIIS considered that the importance of baptism should be balanced against how the Iranian authorities perceive a convert. A person who has attended trainings and sessions abroad may be considered a convert, although he or she may not have officially been baptized.

‘Asked about the situation for a convert who returns to Iran after having converted abroad, i.e. in Europe or a Western country, Mansour Borji [Advocacy Officer for Article 18] found that there would be no difference in the way the Iranian authorities would deal with the case. If the person is known to the authorities and they have shown an interest in him or her before he or she left the country, there could be a risk to him or her upon returning. If the person is unknown to the authorities, the source did not consider that there would be a huge threat towards him or her. The source referred to a case of a family who went back to Iran and upon return, they were threatened and followed around/harassed. It was considered that

Christianity’, 19 July 2017 <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/thousands-iranians-claiming-asylum-europe-converts-christianity/>. Accessed: 7 February 2018

⁷⁵ The Independent, ‘Muslim refugees are converting to Christianity in Germany’, 9 December 2016 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/muslim-refugees-converting-to-christianity-in-germany-crisis-asylum-seekers-migrants-iran-a7466611.html>. Accessed: 7 February 2018

perhaps relatives or others had reported them to the authorities causing the harassment. Ultimately, the family left Iran again. They had secretly begun to attend a house church.

‘Concerning the consequences for an individual upon return to Iran after having converted abroad, CSW [Christian Solidarity Worldwide] said that any convert who wishes to practice his or her faith upon return, would face serious risk.

‘When asked about the consequences of returning to Iran after having been baptized abroad, Elam Ministries said that many Iranians do go abroad and return to Iran after a while. If the authorities in Iran become aware of the fact that a person has been baptized abroad such an individual may risk interrogation and repercussions. The source considered that the authorities may find out that an individual has been baptized through informers and telephone/internet tapping.

‘It was considered that persons who return from Western countries after converting would have to be very careful about doing any evangelizing. When considering the situation of an individual who has converted in Europe who then returns to Iran, their situation would be much the same as that of Iranians who convert in Iran. Such individuals would have to lay low and not speak openly about their conversion. If their conversion is uncovered and the authorities are notified, there is a risk that such an individual will be suspected of links with foreign organizations much the same as a convert who has been living in Iran.

‘The source added that those who are outside of Iran for extended periods of time may be more at risk in that the authorities may suspect them of spying. It was further added that this counts not only for Christian converts but also for other Iranians.

‘Asked about the situation of Christian converts who return to Iran after coming to Turkey or another country, and meeting with other believers, the representatives of the Union Church informed the delegation that if the converts stay “quiet”; i.e., they do not associate with other believers, they may not be discovered and the visits to a foreign country will then not make a lot of a difference for them.

‘According to the representatives of the Union Church, even if not known to authorities, converts can face shunning and even “honor killing” by their families.

‘If a Christian convert is not affiliated with a house church, an international organisation in Turkey said that the risk to him or her [upon return] would depend on how he or she lives his or her Christian life. If such an individual plainly prays at home and does not share his or her faith to others, there would be no risk to him or her. However, within the evangelical groups that these converts may follow, evangelizing is important and therefore if he or she starts doing this, there could be a risk of harm from the authorities.

‘Elam Ministries said that if such a person who returns from abroad is not connected to a house church or network, there would be no particular threat, however as far as his or her Christian faith is concerned all aspects of his or her life will be affected because of their new faith and as a result, he or she

will run into the same issues that other converts face for example with regards to school, marriage, university, employment and housing. They must be secret believers and are unable to speak of their faith to anyone else and to live an openly Christian lifestyle.'

'According to an international organisation in Turkey there are reportedly large numbers of Iranians in Turkey who are involved in informal house church movements with links to similar networks in Iran. Available information to international organizations monitoring the situation in Iran suggests that persons who come to the notice of the authorities on account of their conversion to Christianity are interrogated in relation to perceived threats to society and to the Iranian regime, such as unqualified threats to public order or insults to Islamic sanctities as understood under Iranian law.

'When asked if an international organisation in Turkey considered it would make a difference if a person had been trained or baptized in Turkey or in an European country, the source said that if it only concerns conversion, there would probably be no difference. If baptism is uncovered, it could pose problems for the individual. The person's link to a network abroad would also raise the profile. However, there are no reports of persons who have been detained and officially charged with conversion-related offences after returning to Iran from Turkey.'⁷⁶

- 8.1.2 A Finnish Immigration Service report on Christian converts in Iran, dated 21 August 2015, citing various sources stated: 'No research data on the return of Christian converts to Iran is available, but the common perception is that they will get into trouble mainly if they try to proselytise or otherwise make their religious views public. The state's interest is focused more on the public practice of religion and proselytising than on one's private convictions.'⁷⁷
- 8.1.3 Open Doors told the UK Home Office on 8 August 2017 that a person who converts to Christianity inside Iran is thought to be less of a threat than a person who converts outside of Iran, who is likely to be thought of as an evangelist. The regime is very suspicious of contact with the outside world. The Iranian regime would not explore the validity of a person's conversion when they return to Iran. It would be accepted at face value. A 'convert' who returns to Iran (even if the conversion is not recognised as genuine in the place of conversion such as the UK) may be forced to sign a commitment to return to Islam. This is likely to involve detention and interrogation. Some people leave the country again. Treatment varies from city to city and may not always involve detention⁷⁸.

⁷⁶ Danish Immigration Service, 'Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran: Report from the Danish Immigration Service's Fact-Finding Mission to Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey and London, United Kingdom 25 March to 2 April 2014 and 10 April to 11 April 2014. June 2014 <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/78D46647-A0AD-4B36-BE0A-C32FEC4947EF/0/RapportIranFFM10062014II.pdf>. Accessed: 4 December 2017

⁷⁷ Suuntaus Project, Finnish Immigration Service- Country Information Service, 'Christian Converts in Iran', 21 August 2015 http://www.migri.fi/download/62318_Suuntaus-raportti_Kristityt_kaannynnaiset_IranissaFINALFINAL160915_2_.pdf?dfc90b1525bfd288. Accessed: 29 November 2017

⁷⁸ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Open Doors', 8 August 2017. Copy available on request.

- 8.1.4 Elam Ministries interviewed by the UK Home Office on 6 September 2017 stated that it was very rare for people to return to Iran. When asked the reasons why some people return they stated that those who return have families, property or businesses. Many of those who return go back as their families have had to put up large sums of money for their bail and if they don't go back their families will have to cover the bail money. Lots of people have to give house deeds to ensure the release of family members; the defendant doesn't want their family to lose property⁷⁹.
- 8.1.5 CPIT could find no other sources that stated returnees would be forced to sign a commitment to return to Islam.

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⁷⁹ UK Home Office, 'Interview with Elam Ministries', 6 September 2017. Copy available on request

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Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

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