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Ministry of Immigration
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The Danish
Immigration Service

IRAN

Recruitment of Iranian nationals to the war in Syria

Joint report from the Danish Immigration Service and the Danish Refugee Council based on interviews in Tehran, Iran, Ankara, Turkey and London, United Kingdom, 9 September to 16 September 2017 and 2 October to 3 October 2017

Copenhagen, February 2018

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Disclaimer

This report was written according to the EASO COI Report Methodology.¹ The report is based on approved notes from meetings with carefully selected sources. Statements from sources are used in the report and all statements are referenced.

This report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects of the issues addressed in the report and should be weighed against other available country of origin information on recruitment of Iranian nationals to the war in Syria, including profile of recruited persons, ways of recruitment (forcibly/voluntarily) and consequences of refusing recruitment.

The report at hand does not include any policy recommendations or analysis. The information in the report does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service or the Danish Refugee Council.

Furthermore, this report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

¹ European Union: European Asylum Support Office (EASO), EASO Country of Origin Information report methodology, 10 July 2012. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4ffc33d32.html>

Methodology

The report at hand is a product of a joint mission conducted by the Country of Origin Information Division, Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) to Tehran, Iran and Ankara, Turkey, from 9 September to 16 September 2017 and a follow-up visit to London, Great Britain from 2 October to 3 October 2017.

The purpose of the mission was to collect updated information on five issues recurring in cases regarding Iranian asylum seekers in Denmark:

- Judicial issues
- Relations outside of marriage in Iran and marriages without the accept of the family
- Issues concerning persons of ethnic minorities, (Kurds and Ahwazi Arabs)
- House churches and converts
- Recruitment to the war in Syria.

The present report focuses on recruitment of Iranian nationals to the war in Syria, including profile of recruited persons, ways of recruitment (forcibly/voluntarily) and consequences of refusing recruitment. The findings regarding the four other issues are reported in separate reports.

The terms of reference (TOR) for the mission were drawn up jointly by DIS and DRC, in consultation with the Danish Refugee Appeals Board as well as an advisory group on COI ("Referencegruppen").² The terms of reference are included at the end of the report (Annex C).

In the scope of compiling this report, the delegation consulted six sources in Tehran, comprising diplomatic representations, a legal source as well an analyst. The Danish Embassy in Tehran provided valuable assistance in identifying some of the interlocutors based in Tehran relevant to the terms of reference. The Danish Embassy provided assistance during the mission to Tehran and an official from the embassy also participated in the meetings held in Tehran. Due to the limited access to sources in Iran, the delegation consulted an anonymous source based in Ankara and a consulting agency based in London.

The sources interviewed were selected by the delegation based on their expertise, merit and experience relevant to the mission.

The sources consulted during the mission to Tehran, Ankara and London, are listed in Annex A, and all interviews were conducted in English.

The sources were asked how reference might be made in the report. All sources, except one, requested varying degree of anonymity for the sake of discretion and upholding tolerable working conditions. All sources are referred in the report according to their own request.

The interlocutors were informed about the purpose of the mission and the fact that their statements would be included in a public report. The notes from the meetings with the sources were forwarded to them for

² The group consists of Danish Refugee Council, Amnesty International in Denmark, Danish Institute for Human Rights, Dignity, representatives of two Christian organizations ("Europamissionen" and "Åbne Døre"), the National Commissioner of Police and the Danish Bar and Law Society (representing asylum lawyers).

approval and amendment, allowing the opportunity to offer corrections of their statements. All sources have approved their statements.

Two diplomatic sources consulted in Tehran provided background information to the report, but the notes from these meetings have not been included in the report, in accordance with the sources. In addition, the delegation met with the National Institute of Population Research in Iran which provided background information not directly linked to the TOR. Finally, the delegation paid a courtesy visit to the department for consular affairs in the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Records from these two meetings are not included, either.

The report is a synthesis of the sources' statements, and does thus not include all details and nuances of each statement. In the report, care has been taken to present views of the sources as accurately and transparently as possible. All sources' statements relevant for the topics of the report have been extracted from the full meeting note with each of the particular sources and incorporated into the report and are found in Annex B of this report.

Paragraphs in the meeting notes in Annex B have been given consecutive numbers, which are used in the report when referring to the statements of the sources in the footnotes. The intention hereby is to make it easier to find the exact place of a statement in each note.

The research and editing of this report was finalised by the beginning of January 2018.

The report is available on the websites of DIS, <https://www.nyidanmark.dk/da/Ord-og-begreber/US/Asyl/Landerappporter/> and DRC, <https://flygtning.dk/nyheder-og-fakta/publikationer/rapporter> and thus available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

1. Recruitment of Iranian nationals to the war in Syria

1.1 Profile of recruited persons

Members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are present in the war in Syria,³ as well as members of the Basij.⁴

It is the elite force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who are fighting in Syria, according to a Western embassy (4).⁵ A source noted that it is either regular or professional members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or Basij who are sent into Syria.⁶

Armed forces from the Iranian army have also been stationed in Syria.⁷ A Western embassy (3) explained that the Iranian army has dispatched commandos from its Special Forces, known as the 65th Brigade to Syria. Brigade 65 of the Special Airborne Force is part of the Ground Force. Other units were also sent as advisors to Syria.^{8,9} According to an anonymous legal source, it is professional and not ordinary recruits who are deployed to the war in Syria. The recruitment is not mandatory i.e. Iranian civilians are not called up to service for the war in Syria, the same source added.¹⁰

The recruited Iranians will receive training before the deployment to the war.¹¹ Recruits will undergo basic military training, including combat courses and courses in demining and they will also be trained in carrying light arms.¹² The training will be for six weeks to three months depending on the recruited persons' prior skills.¹³ Recruited Iranians will be presented as "advisers".¹⁴ The official statement in Iran is that the deployees are military advisors.¹⁵

Non-members of the Basij or the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps wanting to be deployed to the war in Syria have to undergo a training process, Middle East Consultancy Services said.¹⁶ An anonymous analyst added that to enter Basij, the person must have named references, but no special skills are needed.¹⁷

The recruits are typically conservative Shia Muslims; Sunnis would not be recruited, a source said.¹⁸

³ A Western embassy (2): 9; a Western embassy (4): 14; an anonymous legal source: 22; an anonymous analyst: 17; Middle East Consultancy Services: 35

⁴ A Western embassy (2): 9; an anonymous legal source: 22; an anonymous analyst: 17; Middle East Consultancy Services: 35

⁵ A Western embassy (4): 14

⁶ An anonymous analyst: 17

⁷ An anonymous legal source: 22; a Western embassy (3): 12

⁸ A Western embassy (3): 12

⁹ Fars News Agency, 'Top Commander Reiterates Iranian Militaries' Continued Mission in Syria', 17 April 2016, <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950129001442>, New China, 'Iran insists to maintain military advisory mission in Syria', 24 October 2017 http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/24/c_136702758.htm

¹⁰ An anonymous legal source: 23

¹¹ A Western embassy (1): 1; an anonymous source: 29; an anonymous analyst: 21

¹² An anonymous analyst: 21

¹³ A Western embassy (1): 1

¹⁴ An anonymous analyst: 21

¹⁵ A Western embassy (1): 2

¹⁶ Middle East Consultancy Services: 36

¹⁷ An anonymous analyst: 18

The period of deployment is three to four months with possibility of extension.¹⁹

1.2 Ways of recruitment (forcibly/voluntarily)

The recruitment to the war in Syria is on a voluntary basis.²⁰ Furthermore, the involved Iranian units have no shortage of recruits.²¹ According to one source there seems to be less enthusiasm today to volunteer after the reporting on casualties has become more open.²²

The financial reward of going to the war in Syria is a motivation for the recruits.²³ The access to several goods upon return to Iran is as well an incentive.²⁴ A Western embassy (1) explained that the recruits will get a job and have access to university when returning.²⁵ Ideological conviction, including the defence of the Shia sacred sites in Syria, is another factor for joining the war in Syria.²⁶

A source pointed out that the recruits are persons in all ages but mostly young people. Most of them are from lower-class families, but there are also persons from the middle class.²⁷ Another source added that usually, it is people from rural areas with few job opportunities who are recruited.²⁸

One source had unconfirmed knowledge about forced recruitment of government employees who already had received military training, to go to Syria. Usually, it is employees with critical views on the government behaviour.²⁹

1.3 Consequences of refusing recruitment

As the recruitment to the war in Syria is voluntary, there will be no consequences if rejecting to go to Syria.³⁰ If a recruited person changes his mind about deployment e.g. after the first three months of deployment to the war, he will not be a part of the next envoy and there will be no consequences with that regard.³¹

As regards the general opinion about recruitment to the war in Syria, a source stated that martyrs have a high status in conservative and Islamic parts of Iran.³² A Western embassy (1) noted that people understand

¹⁸ A Western embassy (1): 4

¹⁹ A Western Embassy (1): 1; An anonymous source: 30

²⁰ A Western embassy (3): 11, 13; a Western embassy (4): 14; Middle East Consultancy Services: 37; an anonymous analyst: 19; an anonymous legal source: 24

²¹ A Western embassy (1): 5; a Western embassy (3): 13; Middle East Consultancy Services: 37

²² A Western embassy (4): 15

²³ A Western embassy (4): 14; an anonymous analyst: 17; a Western embassy (1): 6; a Western embassy (3): 11; anonymous source: 32

²⁴ An anonymous source: 32; a Western embassy (1): 6

²⁵ A Western embassy (1): 6

²⁶ A Western embassy (4): 14; an anonymous analyst: 19; Middle East Consultancy Services: 38; a Western embassy (3): 11

²⁷ A Western embassy (3): 10

²⁸ An anonymous source: 28

²⁹ An anonymous source: 31

³⁰ An anonymous legal source: 25; an anonymous source: 33; a Western embassy (1): 7; a Western embassy (3): 13

³¹ A Western embassy (1): 7; A Western embassy (3): 13

³² An anonymous source: 34

the motivation among the recruited persons; however, the general opinion among the population, according to the source, is that joining the war is an unwise decision.³³

³³ A Western embassy (1): 8

Annex A: Consulted sources

1. A Western embassy (1)
2. A Western embassy (2)
3. A Western embassy (3)
4. A Western embassy (4)
5. An anonymous analyst
6. An anonymous legal source
7. An anonymous source
8. Middle East Consultancy Services

Annex B: Meeting notes

Meeting with a Western Embassy (1)

Tehran, 11 September 2017

Recruitment to the war in Syria

Profile of recruited persons

1. Recruited persons will receive a special training before the deployment to the war in Syria. The training will be for six weeks to three months depending on their prior skills.
2. The official statement in Iran is that the deployed volunteers are military advisors.
3. Typically, the period of deployment lasts three months with possibility of extension of three months, after a break.
4. The recruits are typically conservative Shia Muslims. Sunnis would not be recruited.

Ways of recruitment (forcibly/voluntarily)

5. Recruiting to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is not a problem: there are enough volunteers.
6. With regard to the incentives to join the war in Syria, the source informed the delegation that a recruited person will receive 1.500 USD per month, and he will have access to several services/benefits, such as a work and access to the university, when returning.

Consequences of refusing recruitment

7. Regarding possible consequences of rejecting going back to Syria after the first three months of deployment, the Western embassy (1) said, there will not be consequences with that regard.
8. People understand the motivation among the recruited persons. Furthermore, there is a religious understanding because of the need to protect the Shia mausoleums in Syria. However, the general opinion among the population, according to the source, is that, it is a stupid decision.

Meeting with a Western Embassy (2)

Tehran, 10 September 2017

Recruitment to the war in Syria

Profile of recruited persons

9. The embassy did not have exact information about the recruitment to the war in Syria. According to the source's understanding Iran is not in war with Syria which means the recruitment is on a voluntary basis. It is members of Basij/the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who are recruited. The embassy did not have any information on forced recruitment of Iranians.

Meeting with a Western Embassy (3)

Tehran, 12 September 2017

Recruitment to the war in Syria

Profile of recruited persons

10. Regarding the profile of the recruited persons, the source said it is persons in all ages but mostly young people. Most of them are from lower-class families, but there are also persons from the middle class.

Ways of recruitment

11. There are so many volunteers who want to defend the Shia Holy Sites in Syria. Most of these people believe in the necessity of the war and are indoctrinated, and finally there might be an economic reason for volunteering.
12. The Iranian army has dispatched commandos from its Special Forces, known as the 65th Brigade to Syria, the source stated, adding that a brigade named "Malek Ashtar" has been stationed in Syria. Brigade 65 of Nohed (Special Airborne Force) is part of the Ground Force. Other units as advisors were also sent to Syria.³⁴

Consequences of refusing recruitment

13. If you are volunteering, and change your mind about deployment to the war, you will not be a part of the next envoy. The source stated there is a sufficiently number of volunteers.

³⁴ Fars News Agency, 'Top Commander Reiterates Iranian Militaries' Continued Mission in Syria', 17 April 2016, <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950129001442>, New China, 'Iran insists to maintain military advisory mission in Syria', 24 October 2017 http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/24/c_136702758.htm

Meeting with a Western Embassy (4)

Tehran, 12 September 2017

Recruitment to the war in Syria

Profile of the recruited persons

14. The recruitment of Iranian citizens to the war in Syria is voluntary and for some connected with prestige. It is the elite forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC, who are fighting in Syria, and it is considered prestigious to be one of the militias supporting them. In addition, defending the Shia shrine of Zainab in Damascus is also a big motivator for joining, as is the economic allowance connected with a mission. In addition there are many militias consisting of (illegal) Afghans and Pakistanis that are recruited in or by Iran to fight in Syria. It is unclear to what extent recruitment of these militias is voluntary. For many of these recruits, the financial gains for their family as well as the promise of legal status in Iran for their families upon completion of the tour in Syria is a big motivator.
15. In the beginning of the war, there was no need for campaigning for volunteers. After the reporting on casualties has become more open, there seems to be less enthusiasm today.
16. Asked if recruits from the ordinary Iranian army participate in the war in Syria, the embassy explained that it is the elite troops from IRGC who participate, and it would be unusual, if IRGC would allow the ordinary army to participate. During the siege of Aleppo there were many Iranians present, and the source would not be surprised if the ordinary Iranian army also had been present.

Meeting with an anonymous analyst

Tehran, 10 September 2017

Recruitment to the war in Syria

Profile of recruited persons

17. Regarding the profile of the recruited persons, they are either regular or professional members of IRGC or Basij. Most of them are Basij “vigilantes” and motivated also by the financial reward they will receive as much as that (or even to a greater extent). They could be pushed by religious fervour and zeal or “thirst for falling as martyrs” against Islamic State and other jihadist and Salafist factions.
18. To enter Basij, the person must have named references, but no special skills are needed. Many Basij members have their roots in the poor families from the South of Tehran. They are usually very young when recruited and often attracted by the equipment they will receive and chances of social promotion, i.e. brand-new motorcycles etc., facilitation of admission to universities or social housing or low cost goods or recruitment by State-affiliated organizations according to the source.

Ways of recruitment

19. Iranians who leave for the war in Syria leave on a voluntary basis for ideological reasons. There is no force involved in the recruitment.
20. The recruited persons will not be sent by force upon enrolment.
21. The recruits will undergo basic military training, including combat courses and courses in demining. They will also be trained in carrying light arms, as Iranians they will be basically presented to act as “advisers” while Shiite Afghans, Pakistanis and Iraqis have basically an infantry role to play on the battlefield.

Meeting with an anonymous legal source

Tehran, 13 September 2017

Recruitment to the war in Syria

Profile of recruited persons

22. According to foreign news sources, armed forces of the Iranian Army, Sepah and Basij are now involved in the war in Syria.
23. The source stated it is professional and not ordinary recruits who are deployed to the war in Syria.

Ways of recruitment (forcibly/voluntarily)

24. Recruitment to the war in Syria is not mandatory i.e. Iranian civilians are not called to service for the war in Syria. Usually recruited forces of the Iranian Army, Sepah and Basij are voluntarily joining the Iranian forces fighting in Syria.

Consequences of refusing recruitment

25. Since recruitment to war in Syria is not mandatory and there is no official call by the Government for the public to join the armed forces, then apparently, there are no consequences for refusing to join the armed forces fighting in Syria.
26. Military has its own rules and regulation. The source is not familiar with the punishment for not honouring your contract with the state.

Meeting with an anonymous source

Tehran, 15 September 2017

Recruitment to the war in Syria

Profile of recruited persons

27. According to the source, recruitment to the war in Syria is a new phenomenon.
28. As regards the profile of the recruited persons, the source informed the delegation, usually it is people from rural areas with few job opportunities. Recruited minorities are promised better conditions upon return.
29. The anonymous source did not have information about whether recruited persons have to be a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, but recruited persons have to undergo some training before the deployment to the war.
30. Regarding the deployment period, the source said the situation is evaluated every fourth month. The information was not confirmed.

Ways of recruitment

31. According to the source's unconfirmed knowledge, the authorities are forcing government employees, who already had received military training, to go to Syria. Usually, these employees have critical views on the government behaviour and are imprisoned as a consequence of it. As a kind of release the authorities force them to go to the war in Syria.
32. An incentive to be recruited is that persons are paid an (unknown) amount, and their families are supported while they are in Syria. Additionally, they are promised several goods upon return.

Consequences of refusing recruitment

33. If it is on voluntary basis, there will probably not be problems if a person refuses going back to Syria after having been there.
34. With regard to the general opinion about recruitment to the war in Syria, the source stated, martyrs have a high status in the conservative and Islamic part of Iran. Furthermore, the government is propagating that Iran should have control in Syria where many Shia Holy Sites are. But this point of view is only welcomed by the conservatives and Islamists.

Meeting with Middle East Consultancy Services

London, 3 October 2017

Recruitment to the war in Syria

Profile of recruited persons

35. MECS stated Iran provides training and support to the ongoing war in Syria. The training and support is provided by the regular branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*Sepah*), Basij and Suleimani's Quds Forces and other clandestine services.
36. Persons recruited are already part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Quds forces or Basij. If an outsider wants to go to Syria, he has to undergo a training process.

Ways of recruitment (forcibly/voluntarily)

37. According to MECS Suleimani's Quds Forces only recruit one male per house. Some attempt to evade this by registering in another region and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have no shortage of recruits. For both, it applies that recruitment is on a voluntary basis.
38. The recruits have claimed to be driven by holy conviction to defend Shia sacred sites in Syria.

Annex C: Terms of Reference

1. Recruitment to the war in Syria

1.1. Profile of recruited persons

1.2. Ways of recruitment (forcibly/voluntarily)

1.3. Consequences of refusing recruitment