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COI QUERY RESPONSE - Iran

Religious freedom and conversion

1. Religious freedom and conversion (2019- 2021)

1.1. Religious minorities: legal framework and general situation

Freedom of religion in Iran is reported to be 'systematically violated in law and practice',¹ and religious minorities continue to face discrimination.²

Article 12 of the 1979 Iranian Constitution with Amendments through 1989 stipulates that:

'The official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja'farî school [in usul al-Dîn and fiqh], and this principle will remain eternally immutable. Other Islamic schools, including the Hanafî, Shafi'î, Malikî, Hanbalî, and Zaydî, are to be accorded full respect, and their followers are free to act in accordance with their own jurisprudence in performing their religious rites. These schools enjoy official status in matters pertaining to religious education, affairs of personal status (marriage, divorce, inheritance, and wills) and related litigation in courts of law. In regions of the country where Muslims following any one of these schools of fiqh constitute the majority, local regulations, within the bounds of the jurisdiction of local councils, are to be in accordance with the respective school of fiqh, without infringing upon the rights of the followers of other schools.'

According to Article 13 of the aforementioned Constitution, 'Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education'.³

In its annual report, USCIRF noted that during 2020 the Iranian government escalated its repression of religious minorities, resulting in deteriorating religious freedom conditions across the country. The same sources added that 'scores of Christians were arrested, assaulted, and unjustly sentenced to years in prison.' In January, Iran removed the "other" option from the religion category on national ID cards, forcing members of the Baha'i community to either deny their religion or be denied this crucial document.⁴ USCIRF further reported that the repression of religious minorities by the Iranian government continued in the first half of 2021.⁵

¹ AI, Amnesty International Report 2020/21; The State of the World's Human Rights; Iran 2020, 7 April 2021, [url](#)

² HRW, World report 2021, Iran, Events of 2020, 13 January 2021, [url](#)

³ Iran, Iran (Islamic Republic of)'s Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989, 17 January 2018, Art. 12, 13, available at: [url](#)

⁴ USCIRF, Annual Report 2021, April 2021, [url](#), p. 26

⁵ USCIRF, Country Update: Iran, Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran, August 2021, [url](#), p. 1

1.2. Conversion: legal framework and general situation

The United States Department of State (USDOS) report covering the year 2020 noted that ‘the law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs’, and that the only recognised religious conversions in Iran are from another religion to Islam. Under *sharia*, conversion from Islam may be considered apostasy,⁶ which is as ‘a capital offense in Iran’⁷ and a crime punishable by death’.⁸

Christian converts from Islam are excluded from the freedom to express their beliefs.⁹ Therefore, only Armenian, Assyrian Christians¹⁰ and those who ‘can prove [that] they or their families were Christian before Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution’¹¹ are recognised as Christians by the state.¹²

According to USDOS, the Iranian Penal Code:

‘Specifies the death sentence for proselytizing and attempts by non-Muslims to convert Muslims, as well as for moharebeh (“enmity against God”) and sabb al-nabi (“insulting the Prophet or Islam”). According to the penal code, the application of the death penalty varies depending on the religion of both the perpetrator and the victim. The law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs’.¹³

The Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre (IRAN HRDC) pointed out that:

‘The legal framework within which apostasy cases are prosecuted is uncertain. In the absence of a uniform definition of apostasy and its criminal elements within Iranian laws, judges often refer to authoritative fatwas and Islamic sources. As a result, the penalties meted in these cases have ranged from prison sentences to the death penalty’.¹⁴

Amnesty International (AI) noted that during 2020, Iranian authorities did not allow individuals born to Muslim parents to convert to other religions or become atheists, adding that those who tried to exercise their right to conversion risked arbitrary detention, torture and death penalty for apostasy. AI also reported that converts from Shi’a Islam to Sunni Islam or Christianity faced discrimination, including in education and employment, as well as arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, torture and other ill-treatment for practising their faith.¹⁵

On 18 February 2021, Iran signed two amendments to Article 499 and Article 500 of the Iranian Penal Code.¹⁶ The United States Commission on Religious Freedom (USCIRF) defined these amendments as ‘alarming’, noting that amendment of Article 499 ‘imposes’ imprisonment and fines to those who insult ‘divine religions or Islamic schools of thought recognized under the Constitutions with the intent to cause violence or tensions in the society’; while the amendment to Article 500 penalises everyone who commits ‘any deviant educational or proselytising activity that contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam’.¹⁷ According to the advocacy group Article 19, the

⁶ USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 12 May 2021, [url](#), pp. 1, 5

⁷ IRAN HRDC, Living in the Shadows of Oppression: The Situation of Christian Converts in Iran, 12 August 2021, [url](#); Australia, DFAT, Country Information Report, Iran, 14 April 2021, [url](#), p. 36

⁸ USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 12 May 2021, [url](#), p. 5

⁹ USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 12 May 2021, [url](#), p. 5; IRAN HRDC, Living in the Shadows of Oppression: The Situation of Christian Converts in Iran, 12 August 2021, [url](#)

¹⁰ USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 12 May 2021, [url](#), p. 6

¹¹ VOA, Iranian Christian Convert Criticizes Iran’s Banishment as Harassment, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

¹² USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 12 May 2021, [url](#), p. 6; VOA, Iranian Christian Convert Criticizes Iran’s Banishment as Harassment, 1 July 2020, [url](#)

¹³ USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 12 May 2021, [url](#), p. 1

¹⁴ IRAN HRDC, Living in the Shadows of Oppression: The Situation of Christian Converts in Iran, 12 August 2021, [url](#)

¹⁵ AI, Amnesty International Report 2020/21; The State of the World’s Human Rights; Iran 2020, 7 April 2021, [url](#)

¹⁶ Article 19, Iran: Parliament passes law to further choke freedoms and target minorities, 19 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁷ USCIRF, Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran, August 2021, [url](#), p. 1

language of both amendments is ‘vaguely-worded’ and therefore it may ‘grant extensive interpretive discretion to the prosecutorial and judicial authorities providing a fertile ground for arbitrary arrest and detention.’ Article 19 further noted that these new provisions are likely to be used against religious minorities, including Baha’is, Yaresan, Mandaean, Dervishes, Christian converts, atheists, and followers of Erfan-e Halgheh (Inter-Universalism). These minorities, ‘who have faced systematic persecution over the past decades are also feared to be at greater risk of persecution as a result of these new provision’.¹⁸

In January 2021, The Economist reported that ‘growing numbers of Iranians seem to be leaving religion or experimenting with alternatives to Shiism. Christians, Zoroastrians and Bahais all report soaring interest. Leaders of other forms of Islam speak of popular revivals.’ The same source noted that this growing trend in conversion is occurring despite ‘great’ risks, being proselytization banned in Iran with ‘dozens of missionaries’ being imprisoned.¹⁹

In late 2019, a man converted to Anglican Church was arrested for apostasy. On 11 January 2020, he was charged with a 3-year imprisonment for “insulting sacred Islamic beliefs” after he responded with a smiley emoji to a joke seen as critical of ruling clerics that had been texted to him on his cell phone’. On February 27, he was charged with a separate accusation of ‘membership in a group hostile to the regime’ and ‘for receiving a Bible verse sent over a cell phone app’. Furthermore, ‘in May, a court upheld the February verdict and added a one-year prison sentence for ‘propaganda against the regime.’ In July, a court overturned on appeal his three-year sentence for “insulting sacred Islamic beliefs,” but upheld the other two sentences’.²⁰

On 21 June 2021, three Christian men, belonging to the Church of Iran, were persecuted under the new amendment of Article 500 and charged with ‘sectarian activities’.²¹

1.3. Situation of Christian converts

According to USCIRF, ‘Iran escalated its persecution of Christians in 2020, particularly converts from Islam’²² and ‘the government of Iran has continued its egregious repression of religious minorities in the first half of 2021’.²³

A 2020 report on the ‘Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran’ stated that:

‘In 2020 Christians, especially converts from Islam, continued to be subjected to repression from the Iranian authorities in violation of their religious liberty, being harassed, charged with criminal activity and sentenced for the peaceful expression of their faith. This repression impacts Iranian Christians in multiple areas, preventing them from living a normal life, free from fear’.

Furthermore, the same report mentioned that the:

‘Christian converts are forbidden from participating in recognised church services and collectively therefore must express their faith in secret, in the so-called “house-churches”. Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) actively tries to infiltrate these house-churches through government agents or informants’.²⁴

According to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) report, Christian

¹⁸ Article 19, Iran: Parliament passes law to further choke freedoms and target minorities, 19 February 2021, [url](#)

¹⁹ Economist (The), Disenchanted Iranians are turning to other faiths, 21 January 2021, [url](#)

²⁰ USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 12 May 2021, [url](#), p. 21

²¹ CSW, Christians stand trial under new amendment to the Iranian Penal Code, 23 June 2021, [url](#)

²² USCIRF, Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran, August 2021, [url](#), p. 27

²³ USCIRF, Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran, August 2021, [url](#), p. 1

²⁴ Article 18 et al., Annual Report 2020, Right Violations Against Christians in Iran, January 2021, [url](#), p.8

converts who perform their religion in private are ‘not of interest to the authorities’ but ‘those who openly propagate Christianity and seek to convert others, in contrast, would draw the attention of the authorities, and face a high risk of official discrimination, including harassment, arrest and prosecution’.²⁵ DFAT further noted that ‘Muslim converts to Christianity risk arrest and detention if their conversion is revealed. Christians found to ‘proselytising’ face a high risk of arrest, prosecution and imprisonment’.²⁶ USODS reported that security officials monitored the registered congregations in order to check whether non-Christians or converts were participating.²⁷ The same report mentioned that converts are arrested ‘for their religious affiliation or activities, and charged them with “operating” illegally in private homes or supporting and accepting assistance from “enemy” countries’.²⁸

On 23 September 2019, Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, from the Church of Iran, begun hunger strike as his 15 year-old son was not allowed to continue his education. The pastor was accused with apostasy in 2012, even if he hadnt ‘practised Islam prior to espousing Christianity’, and was serving a 10-year prison charge when he started the hunger strike. According to a source ‘members of recognised religious minorities, including Christians, are normally exempt from attending classes in Islamic studies, but children of converts to Christianity are considered by the authorities to be Muslims’.²⁹

During 2020, various punishments and limitations were recorded for Christian converts. Some of these include:

- ‘Extreme bail demands’ for conditional release.³⁰
- Intimidation by security offices while the interrogation regarding Christian converts’ faith.³¹
- Two men were punished to internal exile ‘while two others face exile following the conclusion of their prison terms’.³²
- In June 2020, 7 Christian Converts ‘were handed down sentences that included restrictions on work’. Two of these lost the custody of their adopted daughter.³³
- During October and November 2020, two Christian converts were subjected to ‘corporal punishment’³⁴ with 80 lashes after found guilty of drinking ‘Communion wine’.³⁵
- Raids on home churches.³⁶

According to DFAT, converts to Christianity who perform their beliefs openly ‘face a high risk of societal discrimination in the event their conversion becomes widely known, particularly if they are from more religiously-minded Muslim family backgrounds³⁷ as converts from Muslim background are most vulnerable to face ‘persecution from [the government and] their communities’;³⁸ whereas some new Christians find acceptance from their families.³⁹ Societal discrimination may translate into ostracism from family and discrimination in employment.⁴⁰

²⁵ Australia, DFAT, Country Information Report, Iran, 14 April 2021, [url](#), p. 33

²⁶ Australia, DFAT, Country Information Report, Iran, 14 April 2021, [url](#), p. 34

²⁷ USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 12 May 2021, [url](#), p. 26

²⁸ USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 12 May 2021, [url](#), p. 20

²⁹ CSW, Pastor Nadarkhani goes on hunger strike, 1 October 2019, [url](#)

³⁰ Article 18 et al., Annual Report 2020, Right Violations Against Christians in Iran, January 2021, [url](#), p.15

³¹ Article 18 et al., Annual Report 2020, Right Violations Against Christians in Iran, January 2021, [url](#), p.16

³² Article 18 et al., Annual Report 2020, Right Violations Against Christians in Iran, January 2021, [url](#), p.14

³³ Article 18 et al., Annual Report 2020, Right Violations Against Christians in Iran, January 2021, [url](#), p.14

³⁴ Article 18 et al., Annual Report 2020, Right Violations Against Christians in Iran, January 2021, [url](#), p.15

³⁵ Article 18, Second Christian convert flogged for drinking Communion wine, 16 November 2020, [url](#)

³⁶ All Human Rights for All in Iran et al., Written contribution to the Human Rights Committee, 29 June – 24 July 2020, [url](#), p. 5

³⁷ Australia, DFAT, Country Information Report, Iran, 14 April 2021, [url](#), p. 34; Open Doors, What does persecution look like in Iran? What is life like for Christians?, n.d., [url](#)

³⁸ Open Doors, What does persecution look like in Iran? What is life like for Christians?, n.d., [url](#)

³⁹ Open Doors, What does persecution look like in Iran? What is life like for Christians?, n.d., [url](#)

⁴⁰ Australia, DFAT, Country Information Report, Iran, 14 April 2021, [url](#), p. 34

House churches for Christian converts

Since conversion to Christianity is not legally recognised in Iran,⁴¹ the government requires that all Christians and all Christian churches shall be registered with the authorities, 'and only recognised Christians can attend church. Security officials closely monitor registered churches to verify that services are not conducted in Farsi, and perform regular identity checks on worshippers to confirm that non-Christians or converts do not participate in services.'⁴²

Therefore Persian-speaking converts express their faith and 'worship in private homes, in what have become widely known as "house-churches"',⁴³ which have started to operate as a way to 'avoid invidious state action'.⁴⁴ As noted by a joint report by Article 18, Middle East Concern, Open Doors, and CSW:

'For a decade, access to official church buildings has been restricted to the recognised Armenian and Assyrian Christian minorities and Persian-speaking Christians have consequently been forced to resort to meeting in the so-called "house-churches", which are regularly targeted by the security services'.⁴⁵

Sources recorded 'an ongoing crackdown on Christian converts; in the past several years, a number of informal house churches have been raided and their pastors or congregants detained'⁴⁶ and a 'persist in raids on house churches' for 2020⁴⁷ especially in the cities of Kerman, Karaj, Tehran, Malayer, Gonbad, Khark, Rask, and Arak.⁴⁸ People who participate in house churches, or "secret churches", are often arrested and face charges such as "crimes against national security".⁴⁹ Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) stated that 'any gathering of Christians, including social gatherings such as birthday or engagement parties, is treated as potential house church activity, and is subject to raids'.⁵⁰

Some reported cases of targeting of Christian house churches by the authorities during the reference period include:

- Citing the rights group Hrana as their source, Human Rights Watch (HRW) referred that on 30 June 2020:

'A court in Bushehr convicted seven Christians who converted from Islam on the charge of propaganda against the state. [According to the rights group Hrana] the charge stemmed from activities such as organizing "house churches" and being in contact with missionaries outside the country'.⁵¹
- On August 2020, a couple who was sentenced in prison, and was out on bail, lost their appeal and were 'summoned to begin their prison sentences'. The man was charged with the "crimes" of 'conducting evangelism' and 'illegal house church activities' while his wife [was charged] with 'membership of a group with the purpose of disrupting national security'

⁴¹ USDOS, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran, 12 May 2021, [url](#), p. 1; IRAN HRDC, Living in the Shadows of Oppression: The Situation of Christian Converts in Iran, 12 August 2021, [url](#)

⁴² Australia, DFAT, Country Information Report, Iran, 14 April 2021, [url](#), p. 30

⁴³ CSW, Letter to UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on Persian-speaking Christians, 10 November 2021, [url](#)

⁴⁴ IRAN HRDC, Living in the Shadows of Oppression: The Situation of Christian Converts in Iran, 12 August 2021, [url](#)

⁴⁵ Article 18 et al., Annual Report 2020, Right Violations Against Christians in Iran, January 2021, [url](#), p.16

⁴⁶ Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2020, Iran, 4 March 2020, [url](#)

⁴⁷ AI, Amnesty International Report 2020/21; The State of the World's Human Rights; Iran 2020, 7 April 2021, [url](#); Article 18 et al., Annual Report 2020, Right Violations Against Christians in Iran, January 2021, [url](#), p.16

⁴⁸ Article 18 et al., Annual Report 2020, Right Violations Against Christians in Iran, January 2021, [url](#), p.16

⁴⁹ Open Doors, What does persecution look like in Iran? What is life like for Christians?, n.d., [url](#)

⁵⁰ CSW, Iran: General Briefing, 1 May 2020, [url](#)

⁵¹ HRW, World report 2021, Iran, Events of 2020, 13 January 2021, [url](#)

and ‘gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security’’.⁵²

- On February 2021, 11 Christian families, in Karaj, were summoned, by the police, for interrogation ‘where they were warned to stop their house-church meetings and not to visit each other at homes even for social purposes’.⁵³

⁵² CWS, Iranian pastor and wife lose appeal against prison sentences, 17 August 2020, [url](#)

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