

**Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale**

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| <b>Bilagsnr.:</b>               | <b>929</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Land:                           | Iran                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Kilde:                          | Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Titel:                          | Iran: Zoroastrianism, including its areas of practice and activities; situation and treatment of Zoroastrians by society and authorities; religious texts; whether all members have access to religious texts (2020-February 2022) |
| Udgivet:                        | 2. marts 2022                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet: | 27. juni 2022                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
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# IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

Iran: Zoroastrianism, including its areas of practice and activities; situation and treatment of Zoroastrians by society and authorities; religious texts; whether all members have access to religious texts (2020–February 2022) [IRN200943.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

## 1. Overview

According to a report on the Iran 2016 National Population and Housing Census conducted by the Statistical Centre of Iran (SCI), there were 23,109 Zoroastrians in Iran, out of a total population of approximately 80 million (Iran Apr. 2018, 20, 18). Minority Rights Group International (MRG) indicates that there are 30,000 to 35,000 Zoroastrians in Iran (MRG Dec. 2017). *Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes that Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion and that it has both "monotheistic and dualistic features" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 13 Nov. 2020). Other sources note that it is a monotheistic religion (*Le Point* 26 Aug. 2014; Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, et al. Mar. 2018, 10). The Zoroastrian God is referred to as *Ahura Mazda* (*The Guardian* 6 Aug. 2020; *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 13 Nov. 2020; Professor 10 Feb. 2022). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor of Zoroastrianism at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) University of London stated that a distinctive feature of Zoroastrianism is a focus on different aspects of what Zoroastrians refer to as "'good' and 'evil' in nature" and "personal morals" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). The same source noted that "[t]here is a tendency to divide all things (even living creatures) ... into two groups of good and bad," with a belief that "[a]ll that is good comes from *Ahura Mazdā* ('[w]ise [l]ord'" who is seen as the supreme god) who created the world perfect, while all that is bad and destructive comes from the Destructive Force, *Angra Mainyu*" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022).

### 1.1 Founder and Areas of Practice

According to sources, the prophet Zarathustra [Zoroaster, Zartosht] is the founder of Zoroastrianism (*The Guardian* 6 Aug. 2020; *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 13 Nov. 2020), and Zoroastrianism is based on his teachings (*The Guardian* 6 Aug. 2020). According to *Time* magazine, Yazd is the "birthplace" of Zoroastrianism (*Time* 9 Dec. 2008). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a project manager speaking on behalf of Human Rights Activists in Iran (HRA [HRAI]), an organization that monitors and shares news regarding human rights violations in Iran (HRA n.d.), noted that the largest Zoroastrian populations are in the provinces of Yazd and Kerman (HRA 8 Feb. 2022). A country information report on Iran from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), states that "[m]ost Zoroastrians live in Tehran, with smaller communities in Kerman (Kerman Province) and Yazd (Yazd Province)" (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.41). The same source notes that Yazd has "several" holy shrines and sacred sites that are destinations of pilgrimage (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.41). Other sources indicate that Zoroastrians live in Tehran, Yazd, Kerman, Shiraz (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, et al. Mar. 2018, 10; Professor 10 Feb. 2022), and Isfahan (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). The Professor stated that "most" of these areas have "religious and community associations and gathering halls" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). The HRA representative stated that Zoroastrians "should" be allowed to practice their religion throughout Iran (HRA 8 Feb. 2022). According to a report to the UN's Human Rights Committee submitted by Iran, as of August 2021 there are 78 places of worship for Zoroastrians in the country (Iran 23 Aug. 2021, para. 92). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Chapter Chair of the British Columbia (BC) Chapter of the World Zarathushti Chamber of Commerce stated that Zoroastrians are "restricted" regarding the number of temples, with one each in Yazd, Kerman, Tehran, and Shiraz (Chapter Chair 18 Feb. 2022). Further information on the number of Zoroastrian places of worship could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

### 1.2 Religious Activities

A tenet of Zoroastrianism is "good thoughts, good words and good deeds" (*Time* 9 Dec. 2008; Professor 10 Feb. 2022; Chapter Chair 18 Feb. 2022). The BBC states that Zoroastrianism is based on the battle between God and "the forces of goodness and light (represented by the Holy Spirit, Spenta

Manyu" against *Ahriman*, who reigns over "the forces of darkness and evil" (BBC 6 Apr. 2017). According to the DFAT report, "the basic tenets of the Zoroastrian faith include: concepts of heaven and hell; resurrection; a supreme and universal God; divine creation; the spiritual nature of the world and humans; belief in the afterlife; and belief in the basic goodness of humanity" (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.42). The BBC notes that Zoroastrians pray "several" times a day facing sources of light such as the sun or fire which represent the light of Ahura Mazda and that no Zoroastrian ritual or ceremony is performed without sacred fire (BBC 2 Oct. 2009a). The same source further states that in Zoroastrianism, fire is "the supreme symbol of purity" representing the light of Ahura Mazda and "the illuminated mind," with sacred fires preserved in *Agiares* (fire temples) that are never extinguished (BBC 2 Oct. 2009a). Sources note that in Yazd, there is a fire temple which has been burning for approximately 1,500 years (*Time* 9 Dec. 2008; *Le Point* 26 Aug. 2014; Press TV 4 Apr. 2018).

The Professor stated that Zoroastrianism has many celebrations and festivities, with a "minimum" of one celebration per month, noting that most celebrations are associated with aspects of the sun or natural phenomena and there are no days for mourning or fasting (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). Similarly, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes that festivals are an important aspect of Zoroastrianism (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 13 Nov. 2020). The Professor indicated that the festivals include "*Nowruz* (Iranian New year at the spring equinox), *Sadeh* (the celebration of Fire), [and] *Tiregan* (celebration of rain)" in which Zoroastrians gather in their community to celebrate (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the main festivals are the *Gahānbārs* (six seasonal festivals), including the new year festival of Nowruz [*Nōrūz*], which is a spring festival in honour of Rapithwin, and the autumn festival of *Mithra* [*Mehragān*], as well as the days in memory of the dead (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 13 Nov. 2020). According to the *Tehran Times*, the Jashn-e Sadeh festival is registered on Iran's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list and "usually" takes place on 30 January to mark 50 days and nights before Nowruz and is celebrated with the lighting of a large open fire; before the fire is lit, Zoroastrian *Moobeds* (priests) read from the *Avesta* (the holy book), and Zoroastrian children, dressed in white, carrying torches, walk around a pile of shrubs and light the fire (*Tehran Times* 31 Jan. 2022). According to the Professor, there is an initiation ceremony for Zoroastrians called the *sedreh pooshi*, which "most often" occurs before puberty but not necessarily, in which individuals are required to learn specific prayers and during the ceremony a sacred woolen cord called the *Koshti* is tied over a white muslin undergarment called the *Sedreh* (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). Similarly, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* indicates that there is an initiation ceremony where an individual receives a *sadre* (shirt) and *kusti* (girdle) which they are required to wear their entire life (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 13 Nov. 2020).

For traditional burial, sources note the use of a "tower of silence" [*dakhma*] where corpses are left to the natural elements and vultures (*Le Point* 26 Aug. 2014; *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 13 Nov. 2020). The *Guardian* reports that Iran made dakhmas illegal in the 1970s (*The Guardian* 26 Jan. 2015).

### 1.3 Religious Texts

According to sources, the sacred text of Zoroastrianism is the *Avesta* (*Le Point* 26 Aug. 2014; Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.41). BBC notes that the *Avesta* contains what is known about Zarathustra as well as hymns believed to have been composed by him (BBC 2 Oct. 2009b). Sources indicate that the scriptures are written in the Avestan language [also known as Zend (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.41)] (*The Guardian* 6 Aug. 2020; Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.41). *Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes that the *Avesta* is "a collection of texts compiled in successive stages" and contains 21 *nasks* (books) which include the following:

- the *Gāthās* (hymns) attributed to Zarathustra;
- the *Yasna* which is recited by priests during the Yasna (sacrifice) ceremony;
- *Vidēvdāt* [Vendidad] ("*Law Rejecting the Daevas*"), which is composed of sections "recounting how the law was given to human beings, followed by 18 sections of rules";
- the *yashts* (hymns) which are "each addressed to one of 21 deities";
- the *Hadhoxt Nask* ("[s]ection [c]ontaining [s]ayings") description of the fate of the soul after death;
- the *Khūrda Avesta* ("[s]mall Avesta") which is composed of minor texts (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 13 Nov. 2020).

Information on whether all Zoroastrians have access to religious texts could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

## 2. Situation and Treatment of Zoroastrians

### 2.1 Treatment by Authorities

The Constitution of Iran provides the following:

**Article 13** – Iranian Zoroastrian, Jews and Christians shall be the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, shall be free to carry out their religious rites and practice their religion in personal status and religious education.

**Article 14** – According to the stipulation of the Koranic verse [*God forbids you not respecting those who have not fought against you for religion's sake, and who have not driven you forth from your homes, that ye should act righteously and justly towards them; verily, God loves the just* ] The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Muslims are required to treat the non-Muslims with good manners and Islamic justice and observe their human rights. This article applies to those who do not plot or act against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran. (Iran 1979, footnotes omitted, italics and brackets in original)

According to sources, Zoroastrians are legally recognized as a religious minority (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, et al. Mar. 2018, 25; Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.27; Freedom House 3 Mar. 2021, Sec. D2) and can practice their religion openly (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.27) or with "some restrictions" (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights, et al. Mar. 2018, 25). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2020* notes that constitutionally recognized minorities, including Zoroastrians, can "perform religious rites and ceremonies," create religious societies, and conduct personal affairs and education according to their religion but must do so "[w]ithin the limits of the law" (US 12 May 2021, 6). The HRA representative stated that "in general" Zoroastrians do not "face difficulty" in accessing services such as housing, healthcare, employment and education, and when submitting complaints to the police and judiciary (HRA 8 Feb. 2022).

Sources note that there is no region where Zoroastrians are "particularly unsafe" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022) or "not safe" (HRA 8 Feb. 2022). However, the Professor further stated that, "Zoroastrians must be constantly on guard" of being "targeted by the ruling forces" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI), an organization based in the US comprised of journalists, researchers and activists who report on the human rights situation in Iran (CHRI n.d.), stated that "the level of discrimination has often been higher in smaller cities, compared to the capital and large metropolitan areas," with Zoroastrians in Kerman in southeast Iran facing legal battles, while "rarely" [having such issues] in Tehran (CHRI 20 Feb. 2022).

The HRA representative stated that "the law itself is discriminatory towards Zoroastrians and in many cases the law might not be protecting them completely" (HRA 8 Feb. 2022). A report from the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran states that "[o]ngoing discrimination" against religious minorities "remains a serious concern" (UN 11 Jan. 2021, para. 3). The Professor noted that while minorities are officially protected, the situation is "complex and precarious" as "Islamic law discriminates [against] all non-Muslims" and non-Muslims live with "numerous discriminations and also threats, including to their lives" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). *Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2020*, which "assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries," without providing further details, states that minorities such as Zoroastrians have "suffered greatly from discrimination" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020, 2, 37). The DFAT report notes that "Iranian media, senior government officials and government-affiliated religious officials have occasionally portrayed Zoroastrians as devil worshippers and polytheists," which has "reportedly" resulted in "some Zoroastrians concealing their religious background, fearing harassment or discrimination" (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.44). The CHRI representative noted that some traditional beliefs "consider non-Muslims to be 'dirty'," which results in non-Muslims facing "discriminat[ion]" in "law, politics, society, education, culture and employment" (CHRI 20 Feb. 2022). The Professor noted that there have been reported cases of land and buildings owned by Zoroastrians being taken over by squatters and they "sometimes" must pay the squatters or lose their property, "as they have little hope of any positive outcome in their favour through the courts" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). The UN General Assembly notes that there are

ongoing severe limitations and increasing restrictions on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, restrictions on the establishment of places of worship, undue restrictions on burials carried out in accordance with religious tenets, attacks against places of worship and burial and other human rights violations, including but not limited to harassment, intimidation, persecution, arbitrary arrests and detention, and incitement to hatred that leads to violence against persons belonging to recognized and unrecognized religious minorities, including ... Zoroastrians ... , who have faced increasing restrictions from the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran on account of their faith ... (UN 28 Dec. 2020, para. 23)

An article from IranWire, a news organization run by Iranian journalists living outside the country (IranWire n.d.), states that following COVID-19 restrictions, religious sites belonging to Muslims were allowed to reopen while places of worship for other religious groups had to remain closed, with Zoroastrian sites having been forced to close at the beginning of the outbreak, even before the country's lockdown (IranWire 28 Sept. 2020). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.



Sources note that law in Iran is based on Shi'a [Shia] Islam (Amnesty International 18 Feb. 2020, 25; Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.45; CHRI 20 Feb. 2022), with Amnesty International stating that "[f]reedom of religion and belief" is "systematically violated in law and practice" (Amnesty International 18 Feb. 2020, 25). Chapter 6 of the Iran Penal Code provides the following:

**Article 264-** Consuming, including drinking, injecting, smoking, etc, of an intoxicant, whether [the amount] is a little or a lot, fluid or solid, intoxicated or not, pure or mixed, provided that the mixture does not exceed a certain limit so that it is not intoxicating any longer, shall be punishable by the *hadd* punishment.

Note- Consuming beer shall be punishable by the *hadd* punishment, even if it does not result in drunkenness.

**Article 265-** The *hadd* punishment for consumption of intoxicants is eighty lashes.

**Article 266-** A non-Muslim shall be sentenced to the *hadd* punishment only if s/he publicly consumes intoxicants.

Note- If consumption of alcohol by non-Muslims is not committed in public, but if the offender appears in public roads and places while s/he is drunk, he shall be sentenced to the punishment prescribed for openly committing a *harām* (sinful) act [art 638 of the Fifth Book]. (Iran 1991)

Sources note that members of recognized religious minorities are permitted to use alcohol for religious purposes (USIP 12 Feb. 2020; Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 2.32), but can be punished for consuming alcohol in public or distributing alcohol (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 2.32). According to the HRA representative, it does not happen "very often," but Zoroastrian ceremonies have been "disturbed" for drinking wine, "which is part of their religious ceremonies and cultural tradition" (HRA 8 Feb. 2022). The same source further noted that [consumption of wine during religious activities] "mostly" becomes an issue for the government when they "interpret it as '[p]romoting Zoroastrianism'" (HRA 8 Feb. 2022). The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2020* also notes that religious minorities must register with the government to access certain permissions, including for the use of alcohol for religious purposes (US 12 May 2021, 7).

The DFAT report further states that Zoroastrian private schools are supervised by the Ministry of Education, which must approve all textbooks, including religious texts, and the schools must pass a review demonstrating their observance of Islam (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.33). An article by Kourosh Ziabari, a journalist based in Iran, and published by the Asia Times, a news website based in Hong Kong that reports on Asia (Asia Times n.d.), reports that it is illegal for the Zoroastrian community to use their schools for religious ceremonies outside working hours (Ziabari 17 Oct. 2020). The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2020 annual report states that in November 2019 the president of the Zoroastrian Association of Yazd Province spoke out regarding "hiring discrimination against Zoroastrians, restrictions on religious observance, and extralegal activity regarding Zoroastrian-held land" (US 28 Apr. 2020, 25). The Professor also noted that the Water Board routed new pipes through a Zoroastrian cemetery in Yazd (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). The CHRI representative stated that in Kerman there have been instances in which sacred Zoroastrian ceremonial fires have been extinguished (CHRI 20 Feb. 2022). Sources note that "blood money," the money that must be paid [by the responsible party in cases of injury or loss of life], is paid out at half the amount for a Zoroastrian as compared to a Muslim (HRA 8 Feb. 2022; Professor 10 Feb. 2022). The Professor also noted that there have been "several" cases of individuals who have converted to Islam, "usually" in the context of marriage, who have received the entire family inheritance with none of the inheritance going to the remaining Zoroastrian siblings, resulting in the siblings converting to Islam to receive their share; this also occurs when a man marries a Muslim woman, which deprives his Zoroastrian children of any inheritance (Professor 10 Feb. 2022).

According to the Professor, Zoroastrians cannot apply for the "majority" of government positions, particularly for the military as these roles usually indicate that the person "should be" Muslim/Shi'a and that it is "very rare" for a Zoroastrian to hold "any managerial position" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). Similarly, Amnesty International states that, "[o]nly Shi'a Muslims" are "allowed to hold key political positions" (Amnesty International 18 Feb. 2020, 25). The DFAT report states that Zoroastrians are "disqualified from senior government, military, intelligence and judicial positions" and non-Muslims are not allowed to serve "in the judiciary or as public school principals" (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 3.34, 3.45).

Sources state that one seat in parliament is reserved for Zoroastrians (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para. 2.45; US 30 Mar. 2021, 45). The Constitution of Iran provides the following on political representation for religious minorities:

**Article 64 –** The Majlis shall have two hundred and seventy (270) representatives. As of the date of referendum conducted in One thousand three hundred and sixty eight no more than twenty representatives may be added to this number after ten (10) years, by taking into account the human,

political, geographical and other similar factors.

The Zoroastrians and Jews shall have one representative each; Assyrian and Chaldean Christians collectively shall have one representative, and the Armenian Christians of the south and the north shall each have one representative.

The boundaries of the electoral constituencies and the number of representatives shall be laid down by law. (Iran 1979)

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020* further notes that individuals that do not practice Shi'a Islam are prohibited from serving as supreme leader or president, or on the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council, or the Expediency Council (US 30 Mar. 2021, 45). Freedom House states that political representation for religious minorities is "weak" (Freedom House 3 Mar. 2021, Sec. B4). The Professor stated that the position of a [religious] minority MP is "merely lip service" and a minority MP "can do nothing effective to protect the community" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). The DFAT report further notes that outside of the one parliamentary seat, Zoroastrians "may not be elected to representative bodies" (Australia 14 Apr. 2020, para 3.34). Sources state that in 2017, a Zoroastrian who was elected as a councillor to the Yazd city council was suspended due to his religion (CHRI 14 Oct. 2017; HRW 17 Jan. 2019, 294). Sources further state that the councillor was later reinstated (CHRI 14 Oct. 2017; HRW 17 Jan. 2019, 294; Professor 10 Feb. 2022). However, the Professor noted that the electoral system was subsequently amended to "ensure" that a Zoroastrian would not be able to "succeed in the pre-election vetting system" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022).

## 2.2 Treatment by Society

Sources note that "general[ly]" Zoroastrians are respected (HRA 8 Feb. 2022; Professor 10 Feb. 2022). The Professor further stated that the "majority" of the population attributes the values of "honesty and charity" to Zoroastrians (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). According to a 2015 paper by Pejman Abdolmohammadi, a lecturer of political science and middle eastern studies at John Cabot University in Rome, published by the Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), there is a trend amongst Iranian youth of converting from Islam to Zoroastrianism, with the report noting that there are no official statistics due to fear of state persecution (Abdolmohammadi Nov. 2015, 4, 10).

However, the Professor also noted that, "[i]n principle" Muslims living in Iran view "all" other religions as "impure" and if a Zoroastrian is in a position of authority, a Muslim will "not always" show the same levels respect and "may treat them more harshly" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). The Professor also stated that for entrance to "some" academic streams, non-Muslim students are "disadvantaged" as they must take an Islamic theology exam and there are cases where Zoroastrian PhD candidates stated that there was "discrimination against them" by the "election committee" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). The Professor further noted that in situations of legal disputes, "the chances of a Zoroastrian succeeding in litigation against a non-Muslim is highly limited" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022). IranWire reports that a Zoroastrian student at Eghlid university in Shiraz hung the Zoroastrian calendar on his wall and was told by the university that doing so was proselytizing and that if it was not removed, he would be expelled (IranWire 13 Aug. 2018). The same article describes the removal by police of *Faravahar* medallions, "'a symbol for proselytizing Zoroastrianism'," from shops (IranWire 13 Aug. 2018). The IranWire article also reports on Zoroastrians not being allowed to invite Muslims to their weddings and celebrations, and not holding initiation ceremonies due to fear of punishment from the government (IranWire 13 Aug. 2018). The Professor further noted that there have been "recent cases of randomised persecution of Zoroastrians by groups of thugs" in which "threats against person and property have driven some Zoroastrians into hiding or even exile" (Professor 10 Feb. 2022).

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

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**Internet sites, including:** Al Jazeera; Austrian Red Cross – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; [ecoi.net](#); *The Economist*; EU – European Union Agency for Asylum; Encyclopaedia Iranica; Fédération internationale pour les droits humains; Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America; Germany – Federal Office for Migration and Refugees; Harvard University – The Pluralism Project; Human Rights Activists in Iran – Spreading Justice; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center; Islamic Republic News Agency; Médecins sans frontières; Middle East Institute; Netherlands – Ministry of Foreign Affairs; New World Encyclopedia; Organisation suisse d'aide aux réfugiés; *Parsiana*; Radio Farda; School of Oriental and African Studies University of London – Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies; UK – Home Office; UN – Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; United for Iran; US – CIA, Library of Congress; The World Zoroastrian Organisation; *Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism: A Short Introduction*.

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### ecoi.net summary:



Query response on Iran:  
Zoroastrianism and treatment  
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2022)

### Country:

Iran

### Source:



**Original link:**  
<https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?doc=458562&pls=1>

**Document type:**  
Response

**Language:**  
English

**Published:**  
2 March 2022

**Document ID:**  
2071932

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.