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IRN26159.E 28 April 1997

Subject: Iran: Current information on the use of fraudulent or counterfeit passports to exit Iran

Regional Office: 2

From: The Documentation, Information and Research Branch, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Keywords: passports; travel documents; airports; computers; asylum seekers; political opposition; border controls; non-political crimes; civil servants; lawyers; visas; family; Kurds; police; Turkey; Canada; Sweden; Iran;

The following information was provided during an 18 February 1997 telephone interview with the head of the Iran Section at the Swedish Aliens Appeal Board in Stockholm. The source regularly conducts field research in Iran on Iranian refugee claims in Sweden.

The source stated that Iranians travelling abroad are required to obtain permission to exit the country. Permission to exit the country is granted only after a thorough investigation of the applicant's background. The source strongly doubts that active opponents of the regime would be able to obtain such permission.

Exiting Iran through an airport such as Merhabad International Airport in Tehran is difficult because of the intense and numerous document verifications required by security officers prior to boarding an airplane. Computers are used to verify people's identities and backgrounds during these verifications. The source stated that it would be unlikely to bribe an official at the passport office to obtain a false passport or to bribe a security officer at the Merhabad Airport. The source added that the use of a counterfeit passport to exit Iran through the airport would also be unlikely.

The source indicated that Iranians who apply for political asylum in Sweden have left Iran legally with authentic Iranian passports.

The following information was provided during a 10 April 1997 telephone interview with the former immigration officer at the Canadian Embassy in Tehran. The source was in charge of immigration procedures for Iranians while posted in Damascus from 1992 to 1994, and in Tehran from 1994 to 1996. The source indicated that during the course of his duties as an immigration officer he reviewed several thousand Iranian passports. During his posting in Tehran the source was the secretary of the Visa Minded Group (VMG), which is composed of the immigration services representatives of ten western embassies in Tehran, including Canada.

The source stated that during his time in Damascus and Tehran he never came across a false Iranian passport, either one that had been physically modified or indicated a false identity. The source added that the use of false documents, whether identity cards or passports, is an unusual phenomenon. Iranians travelling abroad are thoroughly investigated before receiving their passports. The source stated that it would be very unlikely that people with an opposition background would be allowed to obtain passports.

The Iranian authorities take counterfeiting of Iranian documents very seriously and have trained their border officers to recognize falsifications. These border officers are required to

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conduct strict and thorough verifications of documents at all exit points. Computers are used to verify ~~passports~~ at airports and at border crossings with Turkey. The source stated that during his travels in ~~Iran~~, the closer people got to a border the more often identity checks were conducted.

The source has never heard of cases of bribery involving the acquisition of counterfeit ~~passports~~ or bribing of security officers at airports or land exit points. The source expressed strong doubts that bribery could be used to obtain counterfeit ~~passports~~ because the different branches of the security apparatus are very competitive. An officer caught taking bribes would be denounced by other officers and would be severely punished. Taking a bribe to provide a counterfeit passport to exit ~~Iran~~ represents a serious risk.

The source mentioned the case of two Iranian notaries suspended from their profession for life for making fraudulent Iranian documents. The source indicated that people who forge documents usually reproduce foreign documents, such as visas from Dubai, because it is too dangerous to counterfeit Iranian documents.

The following information was provided during a 11 April 1997 telephone interview with the former visa officer for the Visa and Immigration Section at the Embassy of Canada in Tehran. The source worked at the embassy between 1988 and the end of 1994, and has reviewed around 30,000 Iranian ~~passports~~ as well as other Iranian documents.

The source stated that the fabrication and use of counterfeit Iranian ~~passports~~ is, and has been, very rare. The source has not heard of or seen any cases. The reason is the thoroughness of verification and the existence of numerous independent agencies which monitor Iranian exit control. The fabrication and use of fraudulent ~~passports~~ in ~~Iran~~ is limited to foreign travel documents. The source stated that exit procedures have relaxed since the late 1980s and illegal exit without genuine documents is very rare. Presently, the vast majority of Iranians exit ~~Iran~~ legally. People with a known political opposition background are effectively prevented from leaving ~~Iran~~ through the process of passport issuance screening. Those with political activities who are allowed to receive a passport and travel abroad would travel alone, while their close family members (nuclear family) would be prevented from exiting the country. This measure is taken to guarantee that when a passport is issued to these individuals they would return to ~~Iran~~ upon completion of their visit abroad.

The Mehrabad International Airport in Tehran, and the border crossing point with Turkey are closely monitored to verify the identity of all individuals exiting ~~Iran~~. The source added that the border with Turkey is known to be more vigorously controlled than Mehrabad Airport because of the large number of Iranians who choose to travel to Turkey via the cheaper route, as well as the ongoing security issues vis-à-vis Kurds affecting western ~~Iran~~. The source indicated that bribery to exit the country is extremely difficult due to numerous centres of decision making and exit control and vigilant surveillance by the Iranian intelligence apparatus. Interviews with close family members of those claimed to have left ~~Iran~~ illegally for Canada have also revealed that a vast majority left ~~Iran~~ on genuine Iranian ~~passports~~.

The following information was provided during a 10 April 1997 telephone interview with a former professor of international affairs at Behesti University in Tehran. The source has also been a research consultant with the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin and a fellow researcher at St. Anthony's College at Oxford University in England.

The source stated that the fabrication and use of fraudulent ~~passports~~ is rare in ~~Iran~~. The source added that the punishment for being caught exceeds any benefits one can gain by

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fabricating or using a ~~»false«~~ passport. People with dissident or political opposition activities would not be able to receive a passport. All ~~»passports«~~ are thoroughly verified at exit points against two lists; one from the police for tax evasion and criminal records, the second from the intelligence and security services.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the DIRB within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

References

Former immigration officer at the Embassy of Canada in Tehran and Damascus, Montréal. 10 April 1997. Telephone interview.

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