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Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

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Information on freedom of religion including treatment of Christians

A report issued in March 2017 by the *United Nations Human Rights Council* notes:

“The Special Rapporteur is also concerned about the targeting and harsh treatment of Christians from Muslim backgrounds and members of various Sufi groups, including the Nematollahi Gonabadi order and the Yarsan (also known Ahl-e Haqq), which are considered “deviant faiths” by the authorities and some members of the clerical establishment. These groups continue to face arbitrary arrest, harassment and detention, and are often accused of national security crimes such as “acting against national security” or “propaganda against the State”. Under Iranian law, individuals, including Christians of Muslim backgrounds, can be prosecuted for apostasy, although it is not specifically codified as a crime in the Islamic Penal Code. The Special Rapporteur notes that laws against apostasy clearly contravene the State’s obligation to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief” (United Nations Human Rights Council (17 March 2017) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*,p.17).

In April 2017 the *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom* reviewing events of the preceding year notes:

“During the past year, the government of Iran engaged in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Severe violations targeting religious minorities—especially Baha’is, Christian converts, and Sunni Muslims—continued unabated. Sufi Muslims and dissenting Shi’a Muslims also faced harassment, arrests, and imprisonment” (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (26 April 2017) *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Report 2017: Iran*,p.1).

In June 2017 a compilation of COI sources issued by *Accord* includes noting that:

“The Christian Post quotes a member of the Christian NGO International Christian Concern as saying that the Iranian government has referred to evangelical Christians as a threat to national security, viewing them as being supported by foreign “enemies”...” (Accord (14 June 2017) *Iran: House churches; situation of practising Christians; treatment by authorities of Christian converts' family members*, p.7).

A report issued in July 2017 by *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* notes:

“The Center For Human Rights In Iran (CHRI) has voiced concern over what it says is a “disturbing trend” of arrests and imprisonments of Christian converts in Iran. The New York-based rights group said on July 20 that in less than two months, eleven Christian converts and the former leader of the Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Iran have been sentenced to long prison terms” (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (21 July 2017) *Rights Group Says Iran Jailing Christian Converts*).

In August 2017 the *United Nations Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights* states that:

“Adherents of recognized religions also continue to face severe restrictions and discrimination, and are reportedly prosecuted for peacefully manifesting their religious beliefs” (United Nations Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (14 August 2017) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran (August 2017)*, p.17).

A publication in August 2017 by the *United States Department of State* notes 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 sharia” (United States Department of State (15 August 2017) *2016 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran*).

This report also states:

“Christians who were arrested were reportedly subject to severe physical and psychological mistreatment. The Christian news website, Mohabat News, said the mistreatment sometimes included beatings and solitary confinement” (ibid).

It is also stated in this report 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” (ibid).

It is also pointed out in this document that:

“The government continued to regulate Christian religious practices closely” (ibid).

A report issued in October 2017 by *World Watch Monitor* points out that:

“Five more Iranian converts to Christianity have been arrested in recent weeks, three of whom are still being detained” (World Watch Monitor (17 October 2017) *Iran: arrests of Christian converts continue*).

This report also states:

“Christians are thought to make up only around 1 per cent (around 800,000) of Iran's roughly 80 million people, although precise numbers are difficult to determine. The country is eighth on the Open Doors 2017 World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. At least 193 Christians were arrested or imprisoned in Iran in 2016 – many of them converts. In recent months, more than a dozen Christians have been sentenced to at least ten years in prison for "acting against national security"” (ibid).

Human Rights Watch in October 2017 states:

"Only a few religious minorities, including Zoroastrians, are recognized in the constitution. And even the recognized religious minorities have long been discriminated against in Iran" (Human Rights Watch (28 October 2017) *Iran's Guardian Council Trounces Religious Freedom*).

World Watch Monitor in November 2017 notes:

"An Iranian convert to Christianity has had his 10-year prison sentence upheld after losing his appeal. Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh was sentenced in May alongside three Azerbaijanis. All four men were given 10-year sentences for "missionary activities" and "actions against national security" in Iran" (*World Watch Monitor* (24 November 2017) *Iran: Christian convert loses appeal against 10-year sentence for 'missionary activities'*).

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre 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. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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