

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	705
Land:	Iran
Kilde:	UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Titel:	Human Rights and Democracy Report 2016 - CHAPTER VI: Human Rights Priority Countries – Iran
Udgivet:	20. juli 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	29. august 2017

Recommended citation:

FCO - UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Human Rights and Democracy Report 2016 - CHAPTER VI: Human Rights Priority Countries - Iran, 20 July 2017 (available at [ecoi.net](http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/344414/475440_en.html)) http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/344414/475440_en.html (accessed 15 August 2017)



Human Rights and Democracy Report 2016 - CHAPTER VI: Human Rights Priority Countries - Iran

There was little improvement in the human rights situation in Iran in 2016. Areas of serious concern were the frequent use of the death penalty, freedom of religion and freedom of expression.

Although not all executions are made public, estimates suggest that there were over 530 in Iran over the course of the year. This represents a decrease on the record number seen in 2015. Iran continued to use the death penalty against juveniles and in cases that are not deemed the “most serious” under international law, such as drugs offences.

Homosexuality continues to be illegal and punishments can range from 100 lashes to the death penalty for both men and women. In July, 19 year old Hassan Afshar was hanged after he was convicted of forced male to male anal intercourse when he was 17.

Religious minorities continue to face restrictions in Iran. Members of both constitutionally recognised and unrecognised religions continue to suffer discrimination for peacefully manifesting their beliefs. There were several reports of church property being seized and converts being harassed by security services. May 2016 saw the eighth anniversary of the incarceration of seven Baha’i leaders who have been sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. Arrested in 2008, the seven are amongst the longest serving prisoners of conscience in the world.

The Iranian authorities continue attempts to limit the freedom of citizens in cyberspace. In December the owners of the most followed channels on the messaging app, Telegram, were required to seek official permits in order to operate. There were also repeated reports of popular Telegram channels being hacked by the Iranian cyber police and the owners of these channels being interrogated. This follows on from the November 2015 arrest of 170 individuals for publishing “obscene” content online.

Towards the end of the year, President Rouhani announced a Charter on Citizens’ Rights. The charter is the first of its kind in Iran and has the potential to have a positive impact. However, it appears to repeat many rights that are already legally enshrined and it remains to be seen whether the rights of citizens will improve as a result.

The UK has consistently pressed Iran to improve its human rights record, both through bilateral engagement and with our international partners, including through the UN and the EU. In 2016, we strongly supported the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur. In December, we welcomed the UN General Assembly's adoption of the Resolution on Human Rights in Iran. The UK lobbied hard for global support and the Resolution passed with an increased number of positive votes.

In 2017, we will continue to engage with our international partners to hold Iran to account for its human rights record. In particular we look forward to working with the new UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, Asma Jahangir, and call on Iran to allow her access to the country. We will also support the upcoming EU/Iran dialogue on human rights.

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