

3/2014

ENG



UDLÆNDINGESTYRELSEN  
DANISH IMMIGRATION SERVICE

## **Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran**

**Report from the Danish Immigration Service's fact-finding mission to  
Istanbul and Ankara, Turkey and London, United Kingdom**

*25 March to 2 April 2014 and 10 April to 11 April 2014*

*Copenhagen, June 2014*

**Danish Immigration Service**  
*Ryesgade 53  
2100 Copenhagen Ø  
Phone: 00 45 35 36 66 00  
Web: [www.newtodenmark.dk](http://www.newtodenmark.dk)  
E-mail: [us@us.dk](mailto:us@us.dk)*

## **Overview of Danish fact finding reports published in 2013 and 2014**

Update on security and human rights issues in South- and Central Somalia, including Mogadishu, Joint report from the Danish Immigration Service's and the Norwegian Landinfo's fact finding mission to Nairobi, Kenya and Mogadishu, Somalia, 17 to 28 October 2012  
2013: 1

Iran - On Conversion to Christianity, Issues concerning Kurds and Post-2009 Election Protestors as well as Legal Issues and Exit Procedures, Joint report from the Danish Immigration Service, the Norwegian LANDINFO and Danish Refugee Council's fact-finding mission to Tehran, Iran, Ankara, Turkey and London, United Kingdom, 9 November to 20 November 2012 and 8 January to 9 January 2013  
2013: 2

Somalia - Security and protection in Mogadishu and South-Central Somalia Joint report from the Danish Immigration Service's and the Norwegian Landinfo's fact finding mission to Nairobi, Kenya and Mogadishu, Somalia 6 April to 7 May 2013.  
2013:3

Iranian Kurds; On Conditions for Iranian Kurdish Parties in Iran and KRI, Activities in the Kurdish Area of Iran, Conditions in Border Area and Situation of Returnees from KRI to Iran, Joint report from the Danish Immigration Service's and Danish Refugee Council's fact finding mission to Erbil and Sulaimania, KRI, 30 May to 9 June 2013  
2013: 4

Uganda - Situation of LGBT persons in Uganda. Joint report from the Danish Immigration Service's and the Danish Refugee Council's fact finding mission to Kampala, Uganda from 16 to 25 June 2013.  
2014:1

Update on security and protection issues in Mogadishu and South-Central Somalia, Including information on the judiciary, issuance of documents, money transfers, marriage procedures and medical treatment, Joint report from the Danish Immigration Service's and the Norwegian Landinfo's fact finding mission to Nairobi, Kenya and Mogadishu, Somalia, 1 to 15 November 2013  
2014: 2

## **Abbreviations**

**AIS** Amnesty International's International Secretariat

**AOG** Assembly of God

**ASAM** Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants

**CSW** Christian Solidarity Worldwide

**DIS** Danish Immigration Service

**FCNN** Farsi Christian News Network

**NGO** Non-Governmental Organization

**VPN** Virtual Private Network

**UNHCR** The United Nations Refugee Agency

## Contents

Abbreviations .....	1
Introduction and methodology .....	3
1. Converts to Christianity .....	5
1.1 Consequences of conversion, including obstacles with regard to education, employment and dealings with the authorities .....	5
1.2 Activities involving risks of legal consequences .....	7
1.3 Consequences of conversion with regard to a convert's relation to family and social network .....	11
1.4 Practicing a Christian Life as Converts in Iran and possible restrictions .....	13
1.5 Urban and rural differences with regards to how converts are treated by both the authorities and the surrounding community .....	14
1.6 Situation of converts who return to Iran after having converted abroad, i.e. in Europe/Western countries.....	15
2. Use of internet among converts to Christianity .....	17
2.1 Significance of internet among converts to Christianity, incl. types of online activities and how internet is used.....	17
2.2 Significance of internet in house church communities .....	19
2.3 Monitoring of online activities of individual converts by the authorities and possible risks involved.....	20
3. House Churches .....	21
3.1 House churches, structure/organisation of house churches and activities .....	21
3.2 Surveillance and raiding of house churches.....	25
4. Churches in Iran and converts.....	32
4.1 Current circumstances/situation of existing Protestant and Evangelical Churches in Tehran and other cities .....	32
4.2 Links/relationship between existing Protestant and Evangelical churches and house churches .....	35
5. Activities in Turkey targeting Iranians .....	35
5.1 Conversion in Turkey.....	36
5.2 Return to Iran after conversion, incl. behavior upon return.....	38
5.3 Christian conferences and training seminars in Turkey directed at Iranians .....	40
Organizations, authorities and persons consulted .....	41
Bibliography.....	43

## Introduction and methodology

This report is the product of a fact-finding mission conducted by the Country of Origin Information Division, Danish Immigration Service (DIS) to Ankara and Istanbul, Turkey from 25 March to 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2014. Following the mission, the delegation consulted additional sources in London, UK whose information is also included in the report at hand.

DIS undertook a fact-finding mission to Iran in November 2012 which among other issues focused on the situation for Christian converts in Iran. The need for updated information on converts to Christianity in Iran arose as the issue has been substantial in the caseload regarding Iranian asylum seekers in Denmark in the last couple of years. Due to the limited access to sources in Iran, the delegation sought to consult sources outside of Iran, these being diplomatic sources, international organizations, local NGO's and Christian organizations working with Iranian refugees and asylum seekers in Ankara and Istanbul, Turkey, as well as sources in London, UK.

The terms of reference were drawn up by DIS in consultation with the Danish Refugee Appeals Board as well as other partners. The terms of reference are included as Annex 1.

In the scope of compiling this report, the delegation consulted ten sources during the mission to Turkey and London. The sources consulted during the mission comprised representatives from international organizations, a Western embassy, Christian church groups interacting with Iranians in Turkey, as well as human rights organizations. A complete list of sources consulted is included at the end of this report. For the sake of discretion and personal safety, some sources consulted in Turkey wished to remain undisclosed. Consequently in these cases, the delegation asked the sources how a descriptive reference might best be made to them.

The delegation had anticipated meeting a number of additional sources dealing with Iranian refugees in Turkey, however a number of these sources were now mainly engaged with the high influx of Syrian refugees to Turkey. Additionally, the delegation sought to identify academics knowledgeable on the issue of Iranian refugees in Turkey, however academic sources pointed at the research undertaken by Sebnem Koser Akcapar in 2005/2006 as the most recent research on the subject.<sup>1</sup>

This report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of Iranian Christian converts. The information provided in this report is the information of most direct relevance to typical asylum claims made in Denmark.

The sources consulted were informed about the purpose of the mission and that their statements would be included in a public report. All interviews were conducted orally in English, in a semi-structured manner, and were recorded in writing by the delegation. The notes from a given interview

---

<sup>1</sup> Sebnem Koser Akcapar, *Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey*, International Migration Review, Volume 40, Issue 4, pages 817–853, December 2006. The Delegation consulted researchers at the Migration Research Center at Koc University as well as researchers at the Galatasaray University in Istanbul and Gediz University in Izmir.

were subsequently forwarded to the interlocutor/s in question for approval, giving the source a chance to amend, comment or correct his or her statements. One source did not wish to have its statements included in the final report.

In the report, care is taken to present the views of the various interlocutors as accurately and transparently as possible. It is inevitable that the report will contain some contradictory statements. However, it should be noted that the report has been produced to accurately reflect, to the extent possible, the information communicated to the delegation in the various meetings and does not contain any opinions or policies held by DIS.

The delegation of this mission and editorial team comprised Chief Adviser Else Øllgaard and Regional Adviser Vanessa Ostenfeld, Danish Immigration Service.

This report is available on the DIS's website [www.newtodenmark.dk](http://www.newtodenmark.dk) (refer to publications). Any comments regarding this report are very welcome and should be submitted to the DIS at the address/e-mail address on the front page of this report.

## 1. Converts to Christianity

### 1.1 Consequences of conversion, including obstacles with regard to education, employment and dealings with the authorities

Concerning the obstacles Iranian converts face in Iran because of their conversion to Christianity, an international organisation in Turkey did not consider that there would be any issues if this is not made known. However, if a convert is active in informal church activities or proselytizing, problems may arise with the authorities. Additionally, if conversion comes to the knowledge of the authorities, an individual might lose his or her job. The source explained that at workplaces in Iran, there are offices of Herasat (representatives of the ministry of intelligence and state security) that monitor the employees. They are also present at universities, state organizations and schools. Private companies of a certain size will also have a Herasat office. If Herasat gets news of a person's conversion, he or she could risk being fired from his or her job. Additionally, family members could also risk losing their jobs or be denied access to higher learning.

Converts who are attending university may be expelled or in some cases merely suspended. Asked how a person's conversion might be discovered and when it would be reported, the source explained that if a convert is visiting a house church already under surveillance or proselytizing and sharing his faith with others, this person will risk being reported. A person may proselytize to someone he or she trusts, however mistakenly, and consequently be reported to the Herasat or others. It was added that some converts may get into such a situation because proselytizing is fundamental to their faith. Both proselytizing and disseminating the bible are two essential tenets to the evangelical groups.

When asked how a Christian convert may catch the eye of the authorities, the source said that in neighborhoods of towns and cities, there are Basij connected to the local mosques and a person may be asked to attend mosque and this could especially be expected of men of a certain age. It was added that according to the Islamic rules, the religious obligations for girls and boys to start praying begin at the ages of nine and fifteen respectively, where congregational prayers in mosques are encouraged as part of communal activities. The expectation to attend mosques in neighborhoods can be viewed as part of societal norms and may depend for instance on the mosque or Friday imam's attitude and sensitivities.

At universities for example, attending prayers is not obligatory but there are certain quotas for children of Basij and Sepah officials and the presence of Basij members or supporters give way to an informal way of monitoring of students at universities. Such persons may report on students who display deviant behavior and are proselytizing. Also, in high schools, students are expected to attend mass prayers and those who do not may stick out. This is rarely the case in metropolitan areas.

The source did not consider that the socio-economic profile of a convert would make much a difference in terms of his or her risk of harm from the authorities, except that Basij is more likely to be present among socioeconomically disadvantaged sectors of urban society. However, a convert's ethnic background could play a role. A Kurd or Azeri, for example, could risk already being under scrutiny due to his ethnic background and even more so if he is also a Christian convert.

Regarding the obstacles a Christian convert may face in Iran, AIIS said that converts would have to hide their faith in order to be employed in certain jobs. For many jobs it is necessary to fill out a form in which one's religion is indicated. Overall, there is widespread discrimination against minorities with regard to access to education and employment. The impact of discrimination may vary depending on whether an individual is employed in a private company or a government position. However, even in privately owned companies, employers may be forced by the authorities to dismiss employees on the grounds of their

religious faith. Reference was made to a case regarding an employer of a privately owned company who was forced to dismiss an employee who was a Baha'i.

Additionally, in Iran there is generally a high degree of regulation and filling of forms where one is obliged to state one's religion, for example when, registering at schools, and signing up at the educational centers in order to take the concours for university entrance.

AIS did not have specific information on cases regarding Christian converts and how they are treated in the school system. However, reference was made to the case of Baha'is who may opt out of religious classes while in school. They are monitored throughout their studies and are denied entry to universities and when they apply. However, there is no such information regarding Christian converts.

When asked to what degree a Christian convert is able to live a Christian life in Iran, Elam Ministries stated that in all matters where an individual must deal with the government can become problematic. If you are employed as a civil servant one can risk being checked into by someone at the workplace who is suspicious of people's religious and political inclinations. At governmental places of work and at universities for example, there are committees who are tasked with looking into individuals who come under suspicion. In such a situation, a convert may risk that such a person starts looking into one's background and uncovers that he or she is in fact a convert to Christianity.

With regards to employment, a disclosure that a person is Christian can also have real repercussions and lead to a person being fired, particularly from governmental employment. It is especially problematic if a convert is employed as a civil servant. In this case, one is likely to lose all benefits from such an employment and be terminated from his or her position. Reference was made to a family from St. Emmanuel Church in Tehran who had been Christians for ten years. The father was a teacher and was just coming up for his government pension after 30 years of service. However, it was uncovered that he was a convert to Christianity and he was dismissed from his employment leading to his benefits and pension being taken away from him very suddenly. When asked why this had happened so suddenly, Elam explained that within the last two to three years, there has been a new wave of combating Christians in Iran and that it should be considered in this light. The St. Emmanuel Church had operated for many years however, now it is closed to converts.

Additionally, university students who have converted can face problems if it is disclosed that they have converted to Christianity. A student may share it with some friends and the news may circulate to the wrong people, for example to the so-called protector of the faith at the university, in Farsi Herasat, the Islamic overseers appointed to supervise and implement Islamic laws at schools or any other institution or organization in Iran. Such an individual will risk being expelled from university if he or she does not go back on his or her faith.

According to Mansour Borji, Article 18 Committee, situations in which the convert is faced with obstacles vis à vis the authorities include when registering as a student at university where registration of religion is required or when young men register for military service where registration of religion is also required. In both situations a Christian convert cannot honestly state his or her religion without fear of being exposed.

When asked when being a convert may have legal consequences for an individual, an Iranian network leader in Turkey stated that there is always a risk. Reference was made to a university student who shared with four fellow students at university that she had converted to Christianity. They expressed interest in a bible which she brought to them. One of the fellow students however, was connected to the intelligence police and therefore she was reported to the authorities. A case was started against her and resulted in her



being detained and interrogated for three days. After a first court hearing she was then held in custody for a further couple of days and released. Before a second hearing, she left Iran illegally.

### 1.2 Activities involving risks of legal consequences

#### 1.2.1 Charges used against Christian converts over time

According to an international organization in Turkey, although apostasy does not figure in the Iranian criminal code, there have in the past been cases where judges have made apostasy rulings basing these decisions on the knowledge of the judge and incorporating Islamic law. Reference was made to the case of Pastor Soodmand who in 1990 was executed upon being charged with apostasy. It was added that in 1994 another pastor, Pastor Mehdi Dibaj, was charged with apostasy, released and found killed in a forest. Since 1990, there are no reports of converts from Islam to Christianity having been sentenced to the death penalty for apostasy in Iran. The latest case where a convert has been charged with apostasy is that of Yousef Naderkhani, a Church of Iran pastor, which was covered widely in international media. He was sentenced to three years imprisonment.<sup>2</sup>

In 2009-2010, when Naderkhani's case came up, courts were being pressured by the regime to make use of apostasy charges in cases regarding converts. However, the courts were reluctant as apostasy cases were reserved to special religious courts for clergy. Religious courts were legally the only courts that could try apostasy charges and therefore only in the instance where a religious cleric had converted, would such a charge be applicable. Instead, in courts outside of the religious courts, the cases involving converts would then rather be on charges of disturbing the public order than apostasy.

Since 2011, the only significant change in the way the authorities are treating the converts to Christianity is the crystallization that apostasy is not applicable to converts to Christianity. The Iranian authorities stated in 2009 to 2011 that house churches were linked to outside movements, for example Zionist movements, and organizations abroad, for example in the US. The regime sees the efforts of evangelical movements as a

---

<sup>2</sup> Yousef Naderkhani was arrested on 13 October 2009 in connection with his objection to an educational requirement that all children learn the Qur'an - which he considered to be unconstitutional. Naderkhani was initially charged in connection with his objection, while further charges relating to his alleged apostasy and evangelism were brought later. He was sentenced to death in 2010 following a trial in a local court in the north of Iran. Iran's Supreme Court upheld the verdict in September 2011, but instructed the lower court charged with implementing the verdict to ensure that his conversion to Christianity was a decision taken when, under Iranian law, he could have been considered an adult. The Supreme Court required also that the lower court should give him an adequate opportunity to 'repent' in line with procedures set out in Islamic law. Yousef Naderkhani, who was born to Muslim parents in the northern Iranian town of Rasht, adopted Christianity at the age of 19. He became a member of a Protestant Church before being ordained as a pastor in Rasht. He says he was never a practising Muslim. Naderkhani refused to recant his beliefs during the September 2011 Supreme Court hearing, reportedly telling the judge: "I am resolute in my faith and Christianity and have no wish to recant." In the latter part of 2011, judicial officials in Gilan reportedly sought guidance from Iran's Supreme Leader about how to deal with the case. In the first half of 2012, the authorities signalled that a new trial would be held. In September 2012 Pastor Yousef Naderkhani was acquitted in a re-trial in Iran's northern Gilan province after almost three years of imprisonment. Reference is made to Amnesty International, Iran: *Naderkhani acquittal shows urgent need to allow religious freedom*, 11 September 2012, available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/iran-naderkhani-acquittal-shows-urgent-need-allow-religious-freedom:m-2012-09-11>. The case is also described in detail in the joint report from the Danish Immigration Service, the Norwegian LANDINFO and Danish Refugee Council's fact-finding mission to Tehran, Iran, Ankara, Turkey and London, United Kingdom 9 November to 20 November 2012 and 8 January to 9 January 2013, *Iran, On Conversion to Christianity, Issues concerning Kurds and Post-2009 Election Protestors as well as Legal Issues and Exit Procedures*, p. 25 ff, <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/A8C2C897-1CA9-49D1-BA32-EC3E599D646D/0/Iranendeligudgave.pdf>

drive against the Iranian regime. As a result, evangelical churches and house churches are viewed in a national security frame. This view of the regime explains why some cases involving converts, specifically leaders of house churches, also involved charges of a more political nature.

Concerning the case of Yousef Nadarkhani, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said that according to the knowledge of the organisation, Nadarkhani is still living in Rasht and is carrying on with his business as a pastor. There has been no use of apostasy on Christians in Iran after the case of Naderkhani in which his charges were overturned. Today, all charges against converts and pastors/house church leaders are of a political nature, linking to allegations of threats to national security or espionage, including links to foreign bodies and enemies of Islam, including Zionists.

According to AIIS, the pattern of persecution of religious minorities appears to have seen a shift over time. In the early years following the 1979 Islamic Revolution into the 1980s and 1990's, there appeared to be more cases regarding religious minorities in which the accusations against individuals explicitly mentioned the religious belief or faith of an individual. Particular cases of prosecution of members of religious minorities have received a lot of media coverage internationally. Negative media attention regarding such cases may have led to a shift in the way the authorities treat cases regarding members of religious minorities including the Christian converts. Now, the authorities are likely to charge converts with vaguely worded and broadly defined charges such as "forming of illegal groups", "acting against national security through illegal gatherings" and other similar charges that are imprecise and potentially could capture a range of activities. It was added that this trend was not specific to the group of Christian converts but that these sorts of charges are used to silence a large group of people, including members of religious minorities such as Baha'is, members of ethnic minorities, and others who peacefully express their rights.

An international organization in Turkey explained to this end that Iranian Protestants, with a Muslim background, who chose to convert to Evangelical churches can face problems with the authorities upon their conversion. It is mainly the Evangelical churches that are seen as a threat to the regime and consequently are of interest to the authorities. Some of these churches are based on US funding and the authorities therefore make a link between activities of Evangelical churches and relations to foreign bodies and thus to espionage and undermining of Islam in a political sense. Although it is hard for the authorities to pin such accusations on individuals, there is a threat of such a charge, and there is a public consensus, including the judiciary and law enforcement authorities, that conversion to Christianity and evangelical networks are politically motivated and linked to Iran's relations with the West.

It was also considered that the discourse of some of the evangelical organizations which are active towards Iranians is not helping the situation for converts. For example looking at Elam Ministries, the name Elam denotes an ancient civilization in the Bible in what is now Iran and their mission is directed towards a re-Christianization of the area in the Middle East and the second coming of Christ. It was considered that in the view of the Iranian regime, such discourse bears suggestions of "colonization" by way of organizations with ties to enemies of Iran. The emergence of missionary groups whose work is directed towards Iran is therefore linked to national security and subject to surveillance.

Regarding the changes in how the converts in Iran are treated, an international organization in Turkey observed that there has been a trend lately of relating the issue of converting to national security issues and regime oppositional activities due to the links of house churches to entities abroad, for example churches in the US.

AIIS did not consider that there has been any substantial changes in the situation for Christian converts in Iran under President Hassan Rouhani's administration. Overall, the situation for ethnic and religious

minorities has deteriorated, particularly since the unrest that followed the contested 2009 presidential election. Provinces with minority populations, especially the border regions including Sistan and Baluchistan, Kurdistan and Khozestan have seen an increase in the number of arrests and executions. There has been recorded persecution of Shia Muslims who have 'converted' to Sunni Islam as they are perceived by the authorities to have relations to Saudi Arabia. It was added that although a new Iranian Penal Code was passed into law in May 2013, there has been no improvement in legislation for the religious minorities. Under the revised Penal Code and the Iranian Constitution judges can refer to Islamic law as a source in cases of silence of codified legislation.<sup>3</sup>

As an example of the continued repression of dissent, reference was made to the case of the student Maryam Shafi' Pour who was charged with "spreading propaganda against the system" and "assembly and collusion against national security. She was also banned for two years from any "cyber activities", including internet use, and the press.<sup>4</sup> [According to recent information from AIIS, Maryam Shafi' Pour was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment on 2 March 2014 by the Revolutionary Court of Tehran]<sup>5</sup> Regarding Christian converts, there are no indications suggesting a change in the manner in which the authorities treat them. AIIS emphasized that overall there have been no improvements for minorities in Iran.

### 1.2.2 Iranian legislation and cases against converts

When considering how the authorities treat a convert to Christianity within the legal system, including the criteria of Iranian legislation that determines if a person has converted, AIIS underlined that it should be noted that the Iranian legislation in many areas is not in conformity with Iran's international human rights obligations; for example the rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly are unduly restricted. Moreover, there is a big difference between legislation and how it is practiced as in many cases the minimum safeguards recognized under the laws are in practice ignored. Consider the case where a

---

<sup>3</sup> Article 167 of the Constitution of the Islamic republic of Iran, [Rule of Law for Judiciary]

*The judge is bound to endeavor to judge each case on the basis of the codified law. In case of the absence of any such law, he has to deliver his judgment on the basis of authoritative Islamic sources and authentic fatwa. He, on the pretext of the silence of or deficiency of law in the matter, or its brevity or contradictory nature, cannot refrain from admitting and examining cases and delivering his judgment.* Source: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, [http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/english/human-rights-documents/iranian-codes/3017-the-constitution-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran.html?p=21#.U3tLrof\\_tdw](http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/english/human-rights-documents/iranian-codes/3017-the-constitution-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran.html?p=21#.U3tLrof_tdw)

<sup>4</sup> See: Amnesty International, Urgent Action, Iran: Further information: Jail sentence for Iranian student: Maryam Shafi' Pour. (MDE 13/022/2014, 25 April 2014) available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/022/2014/en>

<sup>5</sup> Maryam Shafi' Pour, was a postgraduate student at Imam Khomeini University in Qazvin who was a member of the women's committee supporting Mehdi Karroubi's 2009 electoral campaign, and who has been imprisoned since 27 July 2013. She was arrested when she obeyed a summons to appear at the Shahid Moghaddas Office of the Prosecutor located in Evin Prison. She was detained and held in solitary confinement in Section 209 of the prison for 64 days, during which she was denied access to a lawyer. Then she was moved to the general ward of Evin Prison. On 16 September 2013, the authorities transferred her to a hospital outside Evin Prison but refused to say why or inform her parents, who had gone to prison to visit her, to which hospital they had taken her. Maryam Shafi' Pour appeared before Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on 21 October 2013, apparently charged with having contact with members of the family of the detained opposition leader, Mehdi Karroubi. On 2 March 2014, the Revolutionary Court of Tehran found her guilty of "spreading propaganda against the system", "assembly and collusion against national security", and "membership of the Advocacy Council for the Right to Education", which is not officially recognized by the Iranian authorities. Subsequently, she was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, ref. Amnesty International, *Silenced, Expelled, Imprisoned, Repression of Students and Academics in Iran, June 2014*, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/015/2014/en/a44b334a-cbcb-468d-a2f8-e3e66ce9e939/mde130152014en.pdf>

person is taken in with suspicion of being a convert. By the time the case goes to court, or the accused may be released without charges, there will have been a substantial risk of ill-treatment or torture while in incarceration. It should not be underestimated what can happen from the time of arrest up until a court hearing. It was further explained that those who are arrested may be kept in secret detention centers which fall outside of the courts system. Both individuals detained in prison and secret detention centres frequently are denied access to counsel.

On whether the cases against converts reach the courts, an international organization in Turkey observed that the Iranian Intelligence reportedly tends to detain persons for longer periods than the law allows, often getting judges to sign off on prolonging detentions after time limits have been exceeded. There have been reports of torturing of converts while in detention and it is considered that the authorities want to intimidate those detained, either to stop their activities or to coerce them to cooperate. Often persons detained for longer periods will be released on bail with no formal charges against them.

Regarding those who have been tortured, the source said that there are no criteria on who would be tortured and who would not. It depends on the time, place and individuals involved in the law enforcement agency engaged in monitoring converts in a particular area in Iran.

The articles of the Iranian criminal code's Book 5<sup>6</sup> relate to acts against national security and collaboration with enemies abroad and the authorities may in cases against converts threaten with such charges. The punishment for collaboration with enemies abroad for example is anything from two years to life imprisonment and the way a case is ruled will be left to the discretion of the judge. Concerning the legal consequences that a convert who has been arrested faces, an international organization in Turkey said that after a convert is released, his or her passport is returned. The authorities would rather be rid of such persons and therefore would not likely forbid him or her to leave the country, but rather entice such an individual to leave through continuous harassment.

Asked which legal consequences a Christian convert may risk, Mansour Borji explained that in Iran there are no direct laws against conversion in the Penal Code. According to article 167 of the Iranian Constitution, if there is no provision, in the penal code for a particular matter, judges may consult Islamic sources and fatwas. The law therefore gives a judge the discretion to make use of fatwas and other religious sources in cases regarding conversion.

Mansour Borji informed the delegation that if you are born Muslim and convert to Christianity, you are considered an apostate. However, there are no recent cases in court where an individual has been charged with apostasy. Mansour Borji referred to a recent case of a female Christian convert who has been imprisoned for a long time. According to the source, based on some religious ruling by Shiia clergy, this woman could have only two options: she could either recant her faith or she would die in prison.

The source further explained that when the new Islamic Penal Code was first presented as a bill to the parliament in 2008, there was a provision for apostasy which passed in the first round in the Parliament. It was later removed (among others due to campaigning by Article 18 and others) and in the existing Penal

---

<sup>6</sup> Reference was made to Penal code of Iran - Book 5, Chapter One: Crimes against the national and foreign security of the State, Article 498 –Article 499- Article 500- Article 501 (Articles regarding establishing groups, propagating against the regime), Article 502- Article 503- Article 504 - Article 505 -Article 506 - Article 507 - Article 508 - Article 509- Article 510 (Articles regarding espionage activities, cooperating with foreign entities, hiding information), Article 511 - Article 512 (Articles regarding the disturbance of public order and security), Chapter Two: Insulting sacred religious values and criminal attempt on national authorities, Article 513- Article 514- Article 515

Code, there is no such provision. However, judges have the freedom to use their discretion (based on Article 167) if the case is not referred to a religious council or clergy. Mansour Borji also referred to the Naderkhani case as an example.

According to the representatives of the Union Church, there have been a high number of people getting arrested and jailed; they are being accused of apostasy which is punishable by death in Iran. According to the representatives of the Union Church, it sometimes takes a long time to get a sentence in Iran. The authorities may detain people for some time without charging them. When they get out of jail, on bail or otherwise, many of them leave the country either legally or illegally. Sometimes those released will be on a list of persons with cancelled passports, and therefore they cannot leave the country legally. Then they will pay a smuggler to be smuggled out. However, it is also possible that people can leave before their names are put on the list if they leave as soon as they hear they are in trouble, according to the source.

### **1.3 Consequences of conversion with regard to a convert's relation to family and social network**

When asked what consequences a convert faces in relation to his family or social network, an international organisation in Turkey considered that a convert may be threatened by family members for example in the instance that a member of his family holds a higher ranking official position. This person may force him or her to stop his Christian activities.

Regarding the risks of maltreatment from actors other than the authorities, the AIIS considered that the question of whether risks could emanate from family, would very much depend on how religious the family was or whether it had close ties to the authorities. As an example, it was explained that a member of the family who holds a government position for example, may be asking themselves whether they could be risking their position by having a convert in the family. Depending on such factors, it was considered that there is a possibility that a family member may report on a convert.

Regarding whether family members to a convert may face consequences due to their family member's conversion, AIIS considered that it could depend on whether or not a family member is actively campaigning for their relatives who have converted. Reference was made to the case regarding Saeed Abedini, the US-Iranian pastor imprisoned in Iran<sup>7</sup>, whose wife has been very active but she is based in the United States (Reference is made to 3.2). AIIS, has over the years, recorded many cases of harassment and intimidation of family members in order to stop them from campaigning. For example, Reza Khandan, the husband of prominent human rights lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, was briefly detained in 2011 and later, along with their then 13 year old daughter, faced a travel ban.<sup>8</sup> There also have been cases of family members who have been arrested and tortured or otherwise ill-treated in order to pressure individuals to make "confessions" to certain charges, however, AIIS did not have information on specific cases regarding converts where this had happened.

---

<sup>7</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Imprisoned Pastor Chained to Hospital Bed, Wife Says, March 17, 2014, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2014/03/abedini-chained-hospital/>

<sup>8</sup> See: Amnesty International, Urgent Action, Iran: Further information: Hunger striker's health now critical: Nasrin Sotoudeh, (Index: MDE 13/071/2013) available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/071/2012/en>

Some Christian converts may risk maltreatment from their own family members and relatives but mostly, Christian converts are facing persecution at the hands of the state, according to Mansour Borji. The source found that it could happen that family members would report on their own family if somebody has converted to Christianity, often with good intentions hoping that an encounter with the authorities will have a 'deterrent' effect on them and make them forget about conversion. It could also happen that neighbors report on a convert, however, the source considered that the threat of persecution stemmed mainly from the authorities.

Asked if the Christian converts would also face problems in relation to their own family members because of their conversion, a non-governmental organization in Turkey informed that according to refugees their problems are mainly related to the authorities. It added that the Iranians are informing them that the interrogation by the authorities and the psychological torture they are exposed to are pressuring many to leave the country. The reasons for fleeing are mostly based on the oppression from the authorities than the day to day social oppression.

When asked about the consequences of conversion in relation to family and social network, Elam Ministries considered that very religious families would likely have some issues with an individual converting within the family. However, many families in Iran do not necessarily follow Islamic practices. Some are quite anti-Islamic while others may be very pro-Islamic. Even one's direct nuclear family can have a problem with one's conversion. It was further explained that a lot of youth are interested in Christianity and those who are more experienced and older in the family may be very critical of such a move towards Christianity due to the fact that they are very much aware of the stance of the government and the risks involved. Parents for example therefore may pressure their children to stop their move towards Christianity out of fear of the system.

It was also considered that individuals who are part of the Islamic establishment exist in many families and communities and that this fact can become problematic for a convert. However, abstaining from Muslim rituals such as not attending mosque for example after having converted would not necessarily arouse any suspicion as many in Iran do not regularly attend mosques.

An Iranian network leader now living in Turkey, said that from his own experience, he had been confronted with critical family members while his immediate family members did not have a problem with his conversion. However, his cousin was chief of police in a county and when he discovered that the network leader and his sister had become Christians, it became an issue as it was considered to reflect badly on the cousin. Therefore the cousin exerted a lot of pressure on the rest of the family in order to turn them against him. As it turns out, his cousin was also his brother-in-law and he ended up putting so much pressure on his wife, i.e. sister to the cousin that she left him and filed for divorce from him. Those within military establishments or other governmental positions in such a situation feel that their own position is at stake and this can lead to a convert being ostracized by his family or even given up to the authorities by his own family members.

As regards the consequences of a conversion in relation to family and social network, the representatives of the Union Church informed the delegation that it is often the immediate family members that may create the biggest problems for the convert including brothers and sisters, mother and father. The reason for this is that they consider that the convert has shamed the family.

### 1.4 Practicing a Christian Life as Converts in Iran and possible restrictions

Asked about the obstacles a Christian convert may face in daily life, Mansour Borji explained that Iran is quite a mixed society and that there is both a conservative group of people and a more secular group of people. Some people from the conservative communities pay more attention to public manifestation of religion such as participation in Friday prayers etc., whereas people from the more secular segment do not pay any attention to such public manifestations. The source assessed that there are more and more atheists in Iran and that this is more accepted among some Iranians.

Mansour Borji further explained that Christian converts are considered second class citizens who have no right to live a Christian life and who have to keep their religious conviction a secret. Converts have to balance between their belief to share their Christianity with others and the daily risk they may face if their faith is exposed to the authorities.

Mansour Borji added that the question of the upbringing of children is also a big issue for convert families in Iran. In school children have to participate in religious education and learn about Islamic principles. In such situations the child of a Christian convert may not realize the security issues if he or she speaks about their situation at home where the family practices a Christian life. The source further referred to the fact that a Christian wedding between converts is not recognized by the Iranian authorities. The only way for converts to Christianity to marry legally in Iran is according to Islamic law.

In terms of religious classes for children in schools, AIIS stated that not attending could be problematic. If a student is Muslim, even if non-practicing, he or she must attend the religious study classes, including Qur'anic studies and Islamic Teachings. Recognized religious minorities such as Zoroastrians may opt out and receive instruction in their own religious classes. However those of Muslim background are obliged to attend the religious classes in school. If a child of a convert does not attend these classes, questions may arise from the school officials which could lead to problems for the family. For example, Yousef Naderkhani was arrested on 12 October 2009, after he had complained about his child being forced to read the Qur'an at school, which he claimed was a breach of the right to freedom of belief.<sup>9</sup>

AIIS said that the organization does not have insight into cases regarding how an individual's daily life is affected due to conversion from Islam, however the source would not rule out the possibility of serious consequences for Christian converts. These consequences could arise as a result of seeking to peacefully practice one's faith, including by attending house church gatherings.

Whether or not an individual showed up for Friday prayers, would, according to AIIS, be unlikely in itself to lead to persecution. However, AIIS noted that the possibility could not be ruled out as there may be situations where an individual is obliged to attend prayers, for example, persons who are living on a military base during their service. Additionally, if an individual is working at a government office which is religious in nature and customarily attends prayers, it might come to the attention of co-workers, the employers, and others at the office if an individual stops to attend. However, AIIS did not consider that not attending Friday prayers would in itself be problematic.

---

<sup>9</sup> To Amnesty International's knowledge, there have been no new charges put against Pastor Yousef Naderkhani, since his release from prison. Yousef Naderkhani was charged with apostasy in 2010, but was later acquitted. His lawyer, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, is currently serving a nine-year prison sentence. AIIS has been campaigning for his immediate and unconditional release. AIIS explained that Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, as a human rights lawyer, was facing charges put against him prior to taking on the Naderkhani case. His charges stem from his representation of human rights defenders and high profile cases that received wide media coverage, membership in the Centre for Human Rights Defenders, and giving interviews to the foreign media.

An Iranian pastor informed the delegation that the problems for converts to Christianity also involve other aspects of life than immediate fear of persecution from the authorities. For example in marriage, a man and a woman who have converted to Christianity from Islam cannot marry as Christians. Such a couple must marry according to Islamic Law. In order to register their marriage, they must have an Islamic marriage contract. There is no civil marriage in Iran. The source said that all Iranian children, and therefore children of converts are taught Islamic teachings from their first year of school and thereby taught a different religion than that of their family.

Whether a convert family experiences problems in connection with sending their children to school, Elam Ministries considered that it very much depends on the school. What issues may arise in such a situation will depend on the school, however, normally a school will have an Islamic supervisor and if this person hears information about a child acting anything other than Islamic, then the family may risk that the authorities are informed. Consequences could be that the family is forced to recant their faith, the child is continually ostracized at school and the family is taken in for questioning.

Another obstacle to leading a Christian life as a convert in Iran is that it is very difficult for Christians to have fellowship with other Christians which is an important tenet to live by for Christians. Any congregating that does go on, takes place in fear of being found out.

In terms of daily life, a convert who returns to Iran or who has converted in Iran, may not only face repercussions from the authorities but also if their family is hostile to the idea of conversion according to CSW. If taking part in Friday prayers is important to the family, then not participating could lead to problems for a convert. CSW added that part of Christian belief is the communal aspect of sharing one's faith with others. If a convert cannot enjoy this tenet with fellow Christians, he or she can face deep isolation which can be damaging psychologically. One should also keep in mind the significance of family, including extended family, in Iranian society and thus the significance of ostracizing from family. Converts also face having to hide their religion in the work sphere or else risk being dismissed.

### **1.5 Urban and rural differences with regards to how converts are treated by both the authorities and the surrounding community**

AIIS did not have any specific information on whether there would be a difference in the approach of the authorities towards converts in a rural versus an urban setting. It was considered that various factors could result in a difference in the authorities' treatment of converts in Tehran as opposed to smaller cities throughout Iran. For example, the reactions from a convert's social network in a smaller and potentially more conservative city could put an individual at greater risk. It was considered that there was a possibility of either family members or neighbors reporting on someone if his or her behaviour did not conform to the given norms of the environment. It was added that monitoring and surveillance of individuals in smaller cities may be easier and as a result, it seems likely that converts in smaller cities would come into the eye of the authorities. AIIS added that the legislation and the court system is the same throughout the country but one must also consider the arbitrary manner in which the Iranian authorities carry out arrests, investigate and sentence individuals.

AIIS did not have specific information on a convert's socio-economic background and how it would influence the way he or she would be treated by the authorities. However, it was considered that those who are well-connected abroad (for example those who have family members abroad who can contact the media or human rights organizations), and whose cases are widely covered are usually positively impacted by the focus given to their cases.



Elam Ministries considered that it was harder for the authorities to control and monitor converts in the larger cities and towns in Iran. It would be easier to monitor Christian groups in smaller towns. However, even city to city there can be a difference with regard to how authorities use their resources in targeting Christians. Ironically, it seems a bit easier for Christian groups to grow in the more religious cities, for example in cities like Isfahan, Shiraz and Mahshad there seem to be quite a few networks, especially Isfahan. In the end it's difficult to say what the reason behind this is. It is certainly cultural and traditional as well as individual factors that play a role.

Asked if there is any difference in the way converts are treated by the authorities in urban and rural areas, Mansour Borji said that the way a convert is treated would depend more on the judge than on the urban/rural situation. The source referred again to the Naderkhani case and said that he was released only because of the international media coverage this case had attracted.

Mansour Borji did not find that the socio-economic background of a convert made a difference with regards to how the Iranian authorities would deal with his or her case. However, if somebody from within the circles of the government, e.g. people in higher positions are involved in conversion then it would make a difference and add to the severity of the situation.

CSW found there would be no visible difference in urban or rural settings with regard to how converts are treated by the authorities. Nor would there be any difference when it comes to the socio-economic profile of the convert. According to the source, what matters is the fact that the individual is a convert.

### **1.6 Situation of converts who return to Iran after having converted abroad, i.e. in Europe/ Western countries**

Mansour Borji explained that 20 years ago, it was possible for a Christian convert to be baptized in a church in Iran. Over time, the churches that did baptize paid the price and due to gradual pressure, this possibility has now been eliminated. Since 2006-2007, converts are no longer baptized in Iranian churches as no one was willing to run the risk of performing a baptism. Christian converts consequently started travelling to Turkey and other neighboring countries to get baptized. Asked if house churches perform baptism, the source said that some churches might.

With regard to the situation of converts who return to Iran after being baptized abroad, be it in Turkey, Armenia, UAE or another country, the source found that they may return to Iran quietly and not encounter any problems. If the person is already monitored by the authorities, he or she could risk consequences upon return to Iran.

According to AIIS it is difficult to obtain information on potential risks an individual may face upon returning to Iran after conversion abroad. If Iranian informants have gathered information regarding an individual who has returned to Iran, the authorities may arrest them for questioning. It is possible that charging and conviction will ensue the arrest and questioning. A wide group of people could be in that position: students, political activists, family members of political persons might even be questioned as well as Christian converts.

Regarding whether baptism abroad would put a person at risk from the authorities in Iran, AIIS considered that the importance of baptism should be balanced against how the Iranian authorities perceive a convert. A person who has attended trainings and sessions abroad may be considered a convert, although he or she may not have officially been baptized.

Asked about the situation for a convert who returns to Iran after having converted abroad, i.e. in Europe or a Western country, Mansour Borji found that there would be no difference in the way the Iranian authorities would deal with the case. If the person is known to the authorities and they have shown an interest in him or her before he or she left the country, there could be a risk to him or her upon returning. If the person is unknown to the authorities, the source did not consider that there would be a huge threat towards him or her. The source referred to a case of a family who went back to Iran and upon return, they were threatened and followed around/harassed. It was considered that perhaps relatives or others had reported them to the authorities causing the harassment. Ultimately, the family left Iran again. They had secretly begun to attend a house church.

Concerning the consequences for an individual upon return to Iran after having converted abroad, CSW said that any convert who wishes to practice his or her faith upon return, would face serious risk. Whether an individual has been baptized in a nearby country or in Europe or the US, would not make any difference. If an individual returns to Iran and is not actually promoting Christianity, the fact still remains that such an individual has left the 'faith' (Shia Islam) and thus threatens the order of the regime.

When asked about the consequences of returning to Iran after having been baptized abroad, Elam Ministries said that many Iranians do go abroad and return to Iran after a while. If the authorities in Iran become aware of the fact that a person has been baptized abroad such an individual may risk interrogation and repercussions. The source considered that the authorities may find out that an individual has been baptized through informers and telephone/internet tapping.

When asked about how persons who have been baptized abroad carry on with a Christian life upon return to Iran, it was considered that Iranian converts need baptism because of their Islamic background. It is easier mentally to live as a Christian after baptism has taken place. After baptism an individual will often display a greater change in behavior that will be obvious to others. Talking from experience, an Iranian network leader said that after he had turned Christian, he no longer used profanity or was angry as he used to be and that this change in behavior was of course noticed by his family members and the people around him. Also, after having become a Christian one is given the command to share one's faith with others. Part of the teachings of the Bible is evangelism and the gospel of Matthew is that one should go and tell people about Jesus. Converts wish to obey this and it is those who evangelize that the authorities want to stop.

It was considered that persons who return from Western countries after converting would have to be very careful about doing any evangelizing. When considering the situation of an individual who has converted in Europe who then returns to Iran, their situation would be much the same as that of Iranians who convert in Iran. Such individuals would have to lay low and not speak openly about their conversion. If their conversion is uncovered and the authorities are notified, there is a risk that such an individual will be suspected of links with foreign organizations much the same as a convert who has been living in Iran.

The source added that those who are outside of Iran for extended periods of time may be more at risk in that the authorities may suspect them of spying. It was further added that this counts not only for Christian converts but also for other Iranians.

Asked about the situation of Christian converts who return to Iran after coming to Turkey or another country, and meeting with other believers, the representatives of the Union Church informed the delegation that if the converts stay "quiet"; i.e., they do not associate with other believers, they may not be discovered and the visits to a foreign country will then not make a lot of a difference for them.

The source did not consider that there would be less risk to an individual who returns to Iran after being baptized in a Western country, if the individual renounces the baptism and explains it to be part of a strategy for coming to the West. This would work for their families, but maybe not for the government authorities. Converts in Iran are subject to arrest, torture and execution; they would normally not be declaring their religion on job or school applications. According to the representatives of the Union Church, even if not known to authorities, converts can face shunning and even “honor killing” by their families. Ethnic Christian minorities (Armenians, Syriacs) are allowed to meet and worship in strictly regulated conditions. The source said that we hear that they also have difficulties, some of which are reported in the media.

### *1.6.1 Situation of converts without a Christian network*

If a Christian convert is not affiliated with a house church, an international organisation in Turkey said that the risk to him or her [upon return] would depend on how he or she lives his or her Christian life. If such an individual plainly prays at home and does not share his or her faith to others, there would be no risk to him or her. However, within the evangelical groups that these converts may follow, evangelizing is important and therefore if he or she starts doing this, there could be a risk of harm from the authorities.

Elam Ministries said that if such a person who returns from abroad is not connected to a house church or network, there would be no particular threat, however as far as his or her Christian faith is concerned all aspects of his or her life will be affected because of their new faith and as a result, he or she will run into the same issues that other converts face for example with regards to school, marriage, university, employment and housing. They must be secret believers and are unable to speak of their faith to anyone else and to live an openly Christian lifestyle. Such secret believers may use Christian satellite programs as a means to communicate with other Christians or obtain Christian materials. Elam considered that many Iranians were being influenced by Christian satellite programs and becoming Christians through live and pre-recorded programs. The programs give up telephone numbers and/or internet sites through which one can get in touch with the Christian organization behind it. Elam added that it also has programs that can be viewed by satellite in Iran in which a telephone number is given at the end that people can call. It does occur that such programs are jammed by the Iranian authorities from time to time.

*Reference is also made to 5.2*

## **2. Use of internet among converts to Christianity**

### **2.1 Significance of internet among converts to Christianity, incl. types of online activities and how internet is used**

Regarding the use of Internet, an international organisation in Turkey considered that there had been an increase in the trainings received in Iran through the Internet over the last year. There are internet based informal church groups, broadcasting and other media, and proselytizing activities, initiated particularly by Pentecostal groups. However, the use of the Internet is more common within political groups. It was further explained that although from the outside it may seem as though the Internet in Iran is very restricted due to government filtering and control, many Iranians are gaining unrestricted access through indirect ways (i.e. proxies and other technologies).

Elam Ministries explained that the internet in Iran is controlled by the authorities and many websites with Christian content are filtered or blocked. Additionally, cyber cafés operate under strict regulations and control. However, many Iranians are quite resourceful and manage to bypass filters and blocks by using

different circumvention tools. It was considered that both satellite and the Internet play a major role in teaching Iranians about Christianity and is one reason behind the growth in converts in Iran. Through the internet, Christians can learn more about their faith and its teachings as well as get into contact with other Christians.

Small Media informed the delegation that the organization is currently undertaking research with the aim of studying the significance of internet for religious minority communities in Iran, including the constitutionally recognized minority communities as well communities such as the Bahai's and the Evangelical Christians. The project is both aimed at highlighting abuses of human rights towards these particular groups and the challenges they face in Iran, as well as at studying how these communities engage in technology in order to maintain their culture, and thereby demonstrating that they are not only victims of human rights abuses but they are also actively organizing themselves.

The research indicated that some communities such as those that experience societal discrimination when manifesting themselves, are actively organizing and connecting to global communities. How the different religious communities interact with online resources varies as well as how integrated these communities are with global Diaspora. Regarding Evangelical Christians, there is evidence of some integration of Protestants in US and UK with house churches that exist in Iran including evidence of outside support of websites catering to Evangelical Christians in Iran or persons interested in Christianity.

In researching the subject, Small Media explained that the organisation has been studying the content of online resources catering to Christians. In order to access these websites, an individual in Iran would have to use circumvention tools, for example a VPN. There are a range of different news sites that report on the status of individual converts or pastors who have been arrested and that report on the overall persecution of Christians. One of these websites in Farsi is fcnn.net, Farsi Christian News Network, whose objective, according to its website, is to connect Christians regionally in Farsi-speaking countries like Iran, Afghanistan and Tadjikistan and which positions itself as largely apolitical. The website also contains Evangelical components and links onto a Farsi Christian Resource Center which contains theological materials, online Bible as well as introductions to Christianity. Some of these types of websites are also integrating with social media and FCNN also has a Facebook page. Facebook generally tends to be the preferred social media website, but the FCNN Facebook page is relatively inactive.

Small Media further explained that another online resource that caters to Evangelical Christians in Iran is Kalameh.com, backed by Elam Ministries. Kalameh is one of the more sophisticated websites and has even developed a special application (app called Entesharate Elam) for mobile phones through which one can access Elam's publications. In terms of availability of the app in Iran, one would have to access it by installing a VPN on one's mobile phone since APP store is blocked by the Iranian government. The app essentially allows you to download content on the website for free, including the Bible as well as an illustrated children's bible.

Another resource for Christian converts in Iran is satellite television and US televangelism seems to be big in Iran. Content from the satellite programs is typically also made available on web portals and on youtube. Programs via satellite is probably the most effective way of reaching out to converts in Iran and the one most used by converts or those interested in Christianity, according to Small Media.

Small Media further explained that there are lots of websites with Christian content in Farsi, some of which are quite slow and outdated. Some of these sites also make use of platforms such as youtube where they broadcast/upload more updated content than what is available on their site. One of these sites is sama.tv which shows weekly updated Christian TV through youtube as well as Christian drama , with the most

popular video on the Youtube account a drama named “Silent Believer” about a woman who has converted to Christianity. With regard to total viewership registered on youtube, there is no evidence that the Sama TV page is widely used or popular among users.

Shabekeh 7 (<http://www.shabakeh7.com/>) is one of the more traditional televangelist shows with a high profile personality. It is a show which is less oriented towards human rights and very much influenced by late night US televangelist shows and is available to Iranians in Iran through satellite. The website of the channel has information on how to access the show via satellite and also links to youtube channel with several hundred videos. Shabekeh 7 has quite a variety of content, mostly faith-based, including discussions about the Bible, call-in shows, and also chat show features as well as a very active Facebook page.

Many of the sites are US based, while Kalameh for example is based in Surrey, UK.

Small Media found that it is difficult to get an idea of the popularity of the online resources available to Iranian Christian converts or Iranians interested in Christianity. First of all, it is not possible to measure the viewership of the satellite programs that Iranians may be able to access. Judging from websites like FCNN.net which does not get a lot a links over a period of 30 days, this site is not one which is very used. By looking at the popularity/viewership of the site's videos on youtube, it is also not possible to distinguish between users inside and outside of Iran.

Looking at social media from the outside, there are a bunch of groups and pages on Facebook whereby Christians communicate. The groups or pages do not look particularly organized and most activities involve posting images and Bible passages , though other interactions could well be taking place via private messaging, or within closed Facebook groups. However, it was considered a useful networking tool. It was added that although Facebook is blocked, people in Iran are accessing it and using it via circumvention tools. Groups with Christian content have a readership in the thousands rather than the tens of thousands, according to Small Media.

## 2.2 Significance of internet in house church communities

According to an international organisation in Turkey, house churches that have connection to churches abroad, for example in the US or European countries, function under supervision of other churches and may receive services or perhaps also training through Skype. The house churches are far from dependent on the Internet, however it is used by some.

On the Internet a group can congregate virtually in an Internet Church via a Chat site or Skype. Classes to converts are also taught this way. Asked how one keeps outsiders with bad intentions from coming into such forums, Elam stated that such a forum has an administrator, usually the leader of the church, and if he or she has any doubts concerning a newcomer, he or she will be blocked from participating. Usually people will learn of these sites or chatrooms by doing simple web searches or they might be advertized on satellite programs.

Elam explained that it has set up special chat rooms through which internet church services are conducted. Such an online service is managed and conducted by a person, a leader, outside of Iran. As mentioned the leader will also be administrator of the site and therefore have the power to block users. It was added that persons who participate online will often use pseudonyms. The users of such forums are normally newcomers to Christianity and may not necessarily be connected to a house church.

Small Media considered that religious minority communities such as Evangelical Christians and other groups that are not recognized in Iran have to rely on resources outside of Iran. For example, there may be pastors in Iran, running house churches for example, however, these are connected to organizations outside of Iran due to the conditions in Iran. One such example is the work of Iran Alive Ministries, which provides online training to Iranian Christian pastors via chatrooms. These chatrooms are moderated by Iran Alive to remove government infiltrators who regularly harass Iranian Christians attempting to take part in online theological training.

The representatives of the Union Church explained that many Iranian Christians are connected via satellite TV and internet to some Iranian Christian Protestant Churches in the US, and in Canada. These American and Canadian churches broadcast to Iran, but the churches are quiet about any in-country links to Iran. The sources mentioned that there are satellite programs targeted towards Iranian Christian converts in Iran broadcasting from the US such as Sat/7. The Union Church does not have any programs of this sort or internet activities aimed at Iranian converts. The sources further informed the delegation that the Iranians are very well connected (through internet and mobile phones) and stay in touch with Iran whether they are in Turkey, the US or in another country.

### **2.3 Monitoring of online activities of individual converts by the authorities and possible risks involved**

Regarding the use of the Internet in Iran, AIIS said that the Internet is highly controlled by the authorities and that a special Cyber police is monitoring the Internet, for example by using automatic triggering of key words that are deemed illegal in the eyes of the authorities.

Concerning what would catch the eye of the authorities and what consequences it may have if one's website is blocked, the source/AIIS said that it is difficult to know what the authorities target and why. Reference was made to the recent arrest in November/December 2013 of persons behind the website Narenji.ir which essentially is a gadget website which had existed successfully for many years. Some of those arrested are still in detention. Regarding putting Evangelistic Christian content up on the Internet, the source said that based on other cases, the authorities would most likely block such content. It was further explained that based on the research of AIIS in cases involving bloggers and/or individuals who have posted content online, the authorities do not always necessarily block the content, but may arrest and pursue a case against an individual all the while not taking down their website. In other cases, the website may be taken down by the Cyber Police.<sup>10</sup>

An international organisation in Turkey also offered the view that that the authorities have established mechanisms to monitor and to control the Internet. When asked whether a convert who uploads Christian content on a website or creates his own website with Christian content will risk being arrested by the authorities, the source is aware that the authorities have access to information on internet use on the individual level, but would likely monitor individual internet usage if there are reasons highlighting a user's profile, such as links with a person who is already under supervision. An internet traffic between an Iranian user and foreign church groups may be such factor that highlights the user's profile.

---

<sup>10</sup> AIIS made reference to the case of the Iranian jailed blogger Mohammad Reza Pourshajari, Amnesty International, Iran: Jailed blogger's health worsening, 10 January 2014, MDE 13/002/2014, <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/002/2014/en>

When asked if the authorities in Iran are able to monitor users who attend online services or visit Christian sites, an Iranian network leader explained that people access these sites via proxy servers and therefore it is difficult to track one's internet activity as one will have accessed the site from IP addresses outside of Iran in different foreign countries.

There is however always a risk involved in going online and practicing one's faith through the internet. If the authorities have any suspicion regarding one's online activities, they might confiscate one's computer and then there would be a chance that they could uncover what sorts of sites have been visited. Evidence of online Christian activities and Christian content on one's computer could lead to possible arrest, detention and imprisonment.

Regarding websites that contain content that is considered oppositional to the regime or otherwise unwanted by the regime, Small Media explained that websites are often blocked. If a website is not blocked, then it could be because it really isn't very popular. Posting Christian Evangelical content could lead to a site being blocked. It was further explained that filtering of the internet is conducted by the authorities through search by certain keywords, however the authorities themselves most often study what websites over short time are growing in popularity. The authorities register this growth in popularity and will have a look at the site to decide whether or not the site should be taken down.

Regarding whether a person whose website is blocked would be at risk of further sanctions from the authorities, Small Media considered that it would be impossible to make a general ruling on the issue. The source explained that one could find cases of persons running Facebook groups that have been arrested. What is important to consider when assessing the risk to a person whose site for example has been blocked is the context in which this has happened, e.g. what is the nature of the activities of the person and of the site, the user's profile as well as the visibility of a website and the number of links generated to the site over a period of time. The offline activities of the person would also count in this context. It is impossible to see the traffic of the website from the outside, however considering these elements, one may get a better understanding of potential risks to a user whose site has been blocked.

Small Media further explained that Facebook is not monitored on a systematic basis and a lot of people will use it and not be concerned about potential surveillance. The only way for the authorities to monitor an individual's activities on Facebook would be if he or she has a friend who is an agent of the authorities or if he or she has not set the privacy settings of his or her page properly (i.e. has an open page). However, there is always an underlying nervousness among users that it could be monitored.

### **3. House Churches**

#### **3.1 House churches, structure/organisation of house churches and activities**

An international organisation in Turkey said that it did not have information on the number of house churches in Iran but did not consider that the number was on the increase. It is impossible to give a figure of how many house churches there are in Iran. The house churches were already numerous due to the pressure on other Evangelical and Protestant church premises that exist above the ground. (Reference is made to 4.1.) It was further explained that most of the house churches do not exist in the long term. The churches change around a lot, changing locations and members. This is also due to the monitoring that the churches face which compels them to close down and open up new churches in new locations. It would be hard to keep the same house church running for two years for example because of their risks of monitoring by the authorities. Therefore, a detection of more house churches popping up here and there may not

accurately be an indicator of an actual growth in the number of house churches. When asked about known areas where house churches exist, the source mentioned Tehran, Rasht, Shiraz and Isfahan as being cities where there seem to be numerous house churches. This may also be indicative of the focus of law enforcement agencies on the church groups in these cities.

As pressure on the churches in the bigger cities started, the growth of the house church movement started and the movement developed also in smaller cities and villages, as (Farsi-speaking) Christians had no other option than to go to the house churches according to Mansour Borji.

Mansour Borji said that the number of house churches is very difficult to estimate and that no source has an accurate figure. He said that in 2003, he came across a house church network which had 31 house churches in Iran. Now this network had grown to over 4,000 house churches. House churches exist throughout Iran, in villages and in the different provinces, according to the source.

The source further said that some house church groups are connected to a network (through their pastors) and some are not. Some groups come across the message of Christ through satellite TV. Others come across information on the internet and share it with close friends and relatives and then form a group. According to the source, there are certain security guidelines for those who are members of a house church connected to a network, one of which is not to form groups bigger than 12-15 members. The guidelines further secure that the leaders of a network is not known to the individual members of a house church group.

Mansour Borji assessed that house churches can be found all over Iran in all cities and provinces. As an example he mentioned that in Mashad, Iranian media had reported that they have identified at least 200 house churches and even in Qom, which is considered one of the holiest Islamic cities in Iran, house churches exist.

Elam Ministries said that it is very difficult to give a figure on how many Iranians, with a Muslim background, that have converted to Christianity. Conversion is of course very subjective, however, the Iranian authorities have a clear idea of what it is to have converted which is when an individual is not ready to go back to Islam. When an individual has converted and been baptized, the authorities are aware that an individual will not likely recant his faith.

Although it is difficult to know the exact figures of numbers of converts in Iran, Elam estimates that around 500,000 to 1.5 million Iranians have converted in the last 30 years and that the number of Christian converts is growing. The source said that there are other higher estimates from different groups in the Diaspora. Elam's figures are based on its own knowledge of the house churches and networks of house churches in Iran that are connected to its mission. Due to reasons of security the different house churches will not know of each other, however, the house church leader who leads different house churches will have knowledge of number of converts within his network. Based on this knowledge, Elam estimates that the number of committed Christians is at least 500,000.

The representatives of the Union Church estimated that the number of Protestants in Iran is around 300,000. This figure is more of a guesstimate and not based on any statistics but on knowledge of the Iranian Christians it is in contact with. Within the last two years there has been an explosive growth in the numbers. It was considered by the source that the church always grows under oppression and because of better technology and communications, more people have exposure to Christianity. According to the source, the Pentecostal movement is the fastest growing movement in Iran.



CSW did not have information on the size of the house church networks in Iran and said that it is difficult to get an insight on this due to the underground nature of the movement. CSW said that it seems as though there are networks all over Iran. In 2011, there were reported arrests of converts in over 33 cities in Iran and since then, the number of cities where arrests have happened has increased. Regarding the types of activities that take place in a house church gathering, CSW said that it would include normal church activities but that it would take place with care. Reference was made to a case of arrest of persons attending a house church gathering who were arrested by the authorities for having consumed alcohol in connection with communion.<sup>11</sup>

Elam Ministries explained that a house church basically starts one to one: for example, a family may become interested in Christianity and get into contact with Elam or other Christian ministries working with Iranians, by way of satellite programs typically, and Elam will put them in contact with a Christian family who will teach them. Converts know by instinct that security is an issue and Elam also instructs them that they should not meet in groups larger than ten. If a person, or a family group, who is interested in Christianity wants to get into contact with a house church, he or she/the family group may be taught one to one for some time and then enter a house church. The sorts of activities that go on in a house church include teaching of the bible as well as prayer and worship. It is often done quietly so as not to arouse suspicion from neighbors. Gradually such a fellowship becomes a house church as it grows and evolves.

When asked how such a house church leader can get resources needed for his fellowship, Elam explained that there are different networks working in Iran, and that Elam is only one of the missions. However, Elam has a lot of resources and therefore other ministries do come to Elam for resources that they may need and Elam does not ask questions.

Regarding the activities of the house churches, a non-governmental organization in Turkey informed the delegation that according to their information provided by the refugees, converts meet mainly for prayer and singing. According to the knowledge of the organization, there are no missionary activities connected to the house churches. Most Iranians are introduced to the house church movement through friends or family members who have converted.

An international organization in Turkey observes that house churches are not necessarily well versed in Christianity, and are essentially community-building initiatives by informal evangelical leaders who are familiar with church doctrines to varying levels.

With regard to the nature of the house churches, the source considered that a house church group may change the setting of the house church, choose to stop meetings for a while and once restarting activities, pick a new place to meet. The leader of such a group could be a pastor, however not necessarily. House churches more often have a communal nature rather than a hierarchal one.

Regarding the number of persons in a house church group, the source considered that it could vary, however it would likely be less than 15 people so as not to attract too much attention, but it could also be up to 30. It was added that it is hard to give a number and that a house church gathering would sometimes be a picnic in a park and it could include from five to 25 individuals.

---

<sup>11</sup> CSW, Four Christians sentenced to 80 lashes each for drinking communion wine, October 23, 2013, see <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=1595> and <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=1600>

### *3.1.1 Ways of coming in contact with and becoming a member of a house church, incl. precautions taken by house churches*

With regard to ways of coming into contact with and becoming a member of a house church, Mansour Borji explained that potential members are kept under surveillance for many months. A house church group may start with a group of family and friends and not before three months later will the group be connected to a network.

The source found that within the last four to five years, due to the pressure on the house churches, it has not been easy for an outsider to become a member of a house church and gaining the trust of a house church. Many groups have therefore been limited to family and friends, but at the same time the movement is Evangelical which means that the members feel an obligation to share their faith with others.

When asked how an individual can get acquainted with a house church or with Christians in general, CSW considered that house churches today are a little more careful in terms of who they introduce to their groups.

### *3.1.2 Diversity of Evangelical groups in Iran*

Asked about the diversity among the Iranian Farsi-speaking Christians with regard to religious outlook, Mansour Borji informed the delegation that there are various Protestant and Evangelical “branches”, including Pentecostal, Brethren, Episcopalian, Baptist and Presbyterian churches. The source assessed that with the huge emigration of Armenian and Assyrian Christians from Iran, Farsi-speaking Christians have probably now outnumbered the ethnic Christians. However, the source emphasized that the Farsi-speaking Christians have no official representation in Iran in the Parliament or elsewhere.

An international organization in Turkey considered that the Pentecostal movements are the strongest of the Evangelical movements in Iran. It was further explained that the Church of Iran emerged as an independent movement and has made different statements with regard to its religious outlook. It has not been consistent on whether it was a non-Trinitarian church for example however, it may now have a more clear understanding of what the church stands for.

On the subject of missionary groups, an international organization in Turkey said that there are many American groups that visit Iran mainly travelling from Azerbaijan and Armenia. There have also been missionaries from South Korea who have been quite active in Iran. Both Methodist as well as a South Korean denomination which was close to the American evangelical groups, have done missionary work in Iran. The strategy of the South Korean missionaries has been somewhat different from other groups in that they typically over a longer period of time were proselytizing towards Iranians who they came in contact with in Iran. Iranians would come in contact with the South Korean missionaries through employment for example, and over time the Iranians would be invited into their church. They also ran a sort of school where teachings were started up towards Iranians who wished to convert. Many of the South Korean missionaries have been identified and have as a result, in the course of the last few years, been deported from Iran on the basis of their activities towards Iranians. These South Koreans were either working in Iran or visiting as tourists. The South Koreans had activities in different locations in Iran, including Rasht, Isfahan and Shiraz.

An international organization in Turkey added that the Korean Church which is now unwelcome in Iran, was proactive. It acted like an established Church in Iran and had very big gatherings and baptized a lot of people. At one point, before 2006, there were rumors that the Church was baptizing up to 200 people a week. In the last one to two years, the source had not heard of the church being active openly. It is rumored that the church still has some underground activities, for example teaching.

### 3.2 Surveillance and raiding of house churches

The authorities are believed to be monitoring those who gather in house churches and people who participate may be at risk of arrest and detention by the authorities according to AIIS. It was added that even if the authorities were not going after ordinary members of house churches, it is highly likely that they have many members under surveillance. In terms of the authorities' surveillance efforts, reference was made to the case of an Iranian Ph.D. student in Belgium who travelled back to Iran for summer vacation. He was summoned by the Ministry of Intelligence and was allegedly asked to spy on Iranian students in Belgium. When he refused, he was sentenced to six years in prison on the charge of "acting against national security by communicating with hostile governments".<sup>12</sup> Such a case, in AIIS's view, is illustrative of the efforts the Iranian authorities are putting into monitoring individual's activities domestically as well as abroad.

AIIS is (also) closely following the case of the Iranian-American pastor, Saeed Abedini, who was sentenced to eight years in prison on charges of "acting against national security by [attending] gatherings" in 2013. Saeed Abedini converted 13 years ago and emigrated, together with his wife, to the US in 2009 where he was trained as a pastor. Some years afterwards, he became engaged in plans to build an orphanage in the north of Iran on land owned by his family and therefore traveled back and forth for a couple of years. In 2012, during one of his visits to Iran, Abedini was put under house arrest. Some months later, he was arrested by the Ministry of Intelligence officials and charged with involvement with the house churches in Iran. There are indications that Abedini has been subjected to torture or other ill-treatment in prison and that he has not received adequate medical care for internal bleeding apparently caused from beatings. In a letter to his wife dated March 2013 he said the nurse at Evin's clinic said he was considered unclean because of his faith and was not treated.<sup>13</sup> In March of 2014, according to reports, he was hospitalized.

Saeed Abedini is currently in Raja'i Shahr Prison in harsh conditions as he is being held in a section with inmates with mixed criminal backgrounds including some with records of violent crimes. As a result, in addition to bad prison conditions, he is also feared to face risks to his personal security.

Regarding the monitoring of house churches and raids, AIIS stated that it did not have information on whether this was a growing phenomenon and explained that most research carried out by AIIS is reliant on contacts outside of Iran. Therefore, AIIS also did not have specific information on whether house churches were growing in numbers.

Since 2010, the authorities have created an environment of fear within the house church communities according to Mansour Borji. The authorities have made efforts towards collecting intelligence about the house church communities and towards eliminating the resources in the communities and conducted raids against the gatherings of house churches. In connection with detention of house churches' members, the authorities have used the Christian converts against each other and forced them to make false confessions under duress. The authorities have urged converts to provide information about how their (house) churches were financed, how they were trained, and the authorities have in this way dragged out a lot of information on the house church movement. The authorities have further confiscated Bibles and in their

---

<sup>12</sup> See: Amnesty International, Urgent Action, Iran: Student jailed after refusal to spy: Hamid Babaei. (index MDE 13/011/2014. 21 February 2014) available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/011/2014/en>

<sup>13</sup> See: Amnesty International, report, *Iran: Repression of dissent intensifies in run-up to presidential election*, (Index: MDE 13/021/2013, 12 June 2013) available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/021/2013/en>

campaign to limit the house church movement, they have tried to dry out the house churches of Christian training materials.

According to the source, the authorities are trying to create an atmosphere of fear by raiding (house) churches. Within the last two years, there has been an increase in arrest and detention of house church members and especially an increase in the arrest of female members according to the source.

Mansour Borji explained that the Iranian authorities' reaction to the house church movement has to be seen in the light of a regime justifying its own ideology and trying to limit its opponents.

Mansour Borji referred to a speech given by the Supreme Leader in Qom in 2010 in which religious minorities such as Bahais, Sufis and Christian house church networks were mentioned as enemies of the state that attempted to weaken the pillars of the regime. After this speech, the security forces were given a green light to pursue house churches networks and a wave of raids on house churches was started at Christmas time in 2010. There was since this speech from Khamenei in 2010 also an increase in official clergy and others carrying out hate speech against Christians.

CSW said that there have been no changes with regard to the situation in Iran for Christian converts since the election of President Rouhani in June of 2013. The situation for converts has continued on a downwards trajectory which started in 2009. Religious minorities are in a difficult situation and especially groups such as Baha'is and Christian converts are in some instances risking political falsified charges. It seems that gatherings among such groups could lead to arrest by the authorities even in the case of social events, like picnics which are not necessarily church gatherings. Reference was made to a picnic gathering in March of 2014 which was stopped by the authorities and its participants arrested.<sup>14</sup> Such examples of arrests of house church members in this case, indicate that house churches are under surveillance by the authorities. It appears that it has come to the point that whenever people gather, there can be a risk of raid.

It was added that it seems as though quite a few house church networks may have been infiltrated and that the authorities monitor those who are attending house churches. Concerning the raids on house churches, the authorities are quite often looking for specific people, asking for specific details, obtaining personal information about others in the network. The authorities are also confiscating computers and cell phones and in this way extracting as much information as possible from the network.

A non-governmental organization in Turkey explained that it seems that the house churches are usually linked to churches outside Iran through the house church leaders. Asked if the surveillance of the house church movement would extend to the members of the house church, the source said that according to its knowledge, it is the house church leaders who are under the surveillance of the authorities.

The source mentioned that some Iranian Christians claim that if Christian converts are called to the office of the Intelligence in Iran they will be presented with copies of e-mails they have sent and content of phone calls they have made as a result of the surveillance performed by the Iranian Intelligence. The refugees assume, the authorities in Iran are interested in pursuing house church leaders and they are not particularly interested in ordinary members of house churches. According to the NGO's refugee experiences, if caught by the Iranian authorities, the house church leaders will normally not be kept in prison for a long term.

---

<sup>14</sup> CSW, Iran, Eight Christians arrested and interrogated, March 7, 2014, see <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=1669>

Often they will be released on the condition that they cooperate with the Intelligence in identifying other house church leaders.

Elam Ministries said that the Iranian authorities do not use their resources on new believers as their priority is to stop the formation of house churches. Therefore they are much keener on targeting leaders of house churches and networks. Very recently the source had heard of the authorities setting up their own “mock” house churches with the purpose of trying to get close to the house church leaders. A new house church would need bibles and training therefore it is necessary for such a new church to get connected somehow. It would also give the authorities the opportunity to find out how a house church receives bibles and training. It was added that for a house church to function well, it needs to be part of a network. It was explained that a pastor might minister four or five groups, i.e. house churches, and therefore actually be a leader of a network of house churches. The different groups or house churches will not know of one another’s existence. The authorities are very interested in getting a hold of such a house church leader as they thereby could get access to a network of house churches.

When asked whether the election of a more moderate President Rouhani is expected to have any bearing on the risks to Christian converts, Elam Ministries said that the present pressure on Christians has nothing to do with president Rouhani. It was explained that Rouhani has the task to help repair the damage to Iran’s front which Ahmedinijad is to blame for with regards to the West. Internally, Rouhani has no influence on the authorities’ management of converts. Reference was made to a government-supported website FergheNews<sup>15</sup> that publishes news on what are defined as sects in Iran, including Christian Evangelicals and Sufism and to the latest report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Iran<sup>16</sup>, in which it is documented that Christian converts are still imprisoned for their faith.

According to Elam Ministries, the authorities have collected so much information by interrogating many Christian leaders on how the house churches work that now, Iranian security officers teach a course for post-graduate students at an institute of higher learning for Muslim clerics in Qom on evangelical Christianity that concerns how one deals with house churches in Iran. Elam Ministries emphasized that the focus of the authorities remains on combatting Christianity whether or not Rouhani is signaling a more moderate attitude.

Elam Ministries made reference to the recent report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Iran<sup>17</sup> which according to Elam Ministries confirms Elam’s perception of the situation in Iran that persecution of converts is on the rise. UN goes by the premise that the Iranian government considers conversion to Christianity to be a number one enemy as it goes against what the Iranian regime stands for. Therefore a large machinery has been put into operation to combat this phenomenon. According to Elam Ministries, since June 2012 the Revolutionary Guard has been responsible for controlling the spread of house churches and one cannot foresee what is going to happen next which adds to the severity of the situation. Asked which consequences this would have for Christian converts, the source explained that raids on homes happen arbitrarily now with no need for warrants from the courts. The source explained that regular meetings with people who are not family, clear distribution of the Bible,

---

<sup>15</sup> Ferghe News link <http://ferghenews.com/>

<sup>16</sup> UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 18 March 2014, A/HRC/25/61, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/534e4d0d4.html>

<sup>17</sup> UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 18 March 2014, A/HRC/25/61, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/534e4d0d4.html>

sharing their faith with others can all lead to raids of peoples' homes. It was added that the Revolutionary Guard is a fear-creating power within the Iranian system.

When asked whether the Revolutionary Guard is currently more involved in the effort to control house church activities, an international organization in Turkey offered the view that intelligence capacity of the Revolutionary Guards would be involved in cases to the extent that there are concerns with national security. Therefore, for instance, if a case involving a house church or network leader is seen in the frame of national security, the revolutionary guard could be in charge. The involvement of the Revolutionary Guards may also be triggered by the Basij militia pursuing a case and/or by the interest of the local Basij militia at the local level. While the Basij is normally charged with policing morality, they are known to be pursuing cases of conversion and proselytization.

When asked whether the Revolutionary Guards Corps was responsible for overseeing the matter of house churches, AIIIS stated that it did not have specific information on this question. It was added that legally speaking, any law enforcement official would need a warrant to search a house. However, in practice, officials from the MOI or the Revolutionary Guards Corps frequently do not carry warrants when making arrests or house searches.

### *3.2.1 Arrests of house church leaders and members*

Asked who is at risk of being detained by the authorities, an international organization in Turkey said that the leaders and hosts of house churches are more likely to be under surveillance, however, regular members may also risk being monitored in the authorities' attempt to get informants within the house churches. Regular members may be threatened to stop their activities or assist the authorities in uncovering house churches or providing incriminating information on the networks of converts. The people arrested are also threatened that their family members will risk harm if they do not cooperate. The types of questions converts get while detained often include questions about their connections to foreigners, who is supporting him or her, who does his or her church cooperate with, where does it receive funds from, which are all questions that have significant political underpinnings to them. There are reports of Christian converts or persons accused with links to the networks of Christian converts having been tortured under detention.

When asked for how long converts typically are detained, the source stated that this often depends on where and when an individual is detained and by which authority. It was added that the situation may change from city to city, from police station to police station and that it is common in Iran to handcuff and blindfold persons arrested and therefore many may not be aware of which authority is arresting them and where they are taken in.

When asked how individuals who have converted are taken in by the authorities, an international organisation in Turkey stated that this usually takes place in connection with a raid on a house church. The authorities will watch a house church for a while and then choose to raid it, arresting all its members. It also occurs that the authorities detain an individual member if they are looking for an informant.

Mansour Borji explained that the typical pattern for a raid of a house church group is that a group of 12-13 members are arrested together. A core group of eight to ten members who do not belong to the leadership will be forced to recant their faith and make a commitment not to engage in such activities again. Members may be forced to make false confessions against other members and two to three core members of the group may be charged. At present, the security forces are not only pursuing house church leaders and members, but also leaders and church members from (Farsi-speaking) churches may face charges.

Mansour Borji explained that the authorities are only interested in the house church members if they can use them as a tool against other church members. Otherwise they do not want to keep them in prison for long. When a sentence is given to a convert, the convert has the right to appeal. The appeal will take from a couple of months to a year or more to proceed. Some are also given a suspended sentence and in this way kept in uncertainty without knowing his or her status and without knowing if he or she will be in prison tomorrow. Others may be released on bail before any sentence has been handed down to them and are thereby also kept in uncertainty about their status.

The source said that in 2008-2009, there was an increase in reports that the authorities were demanding money from converts who had been arrested in order for them to be released. This was not a normal bail procedure. Christians who were asked to pay these large sums of money were not given any receipts or court recognition of these funds. This is no longer the situation.

When asked what would lead to arrest, CSW explained that the authorities generally appear threatened by persons turning away from the theology of the Islamic theocracy, especially young people. From Iranian high level officials, it has been articulated that Evangelical Christians represent an evil sect that threatens the youth of Iran. There is a big push against converts to intimidate them and others not to convert. Converts who are charged by the authorities in connection with arrest receive charges with political underpinnings, including charges of threats to the state.

CSW mentioned that since 2009-2010, the Iranian authorities have managed to infiltrate the house churches. The number of arrests of house church members has gone up and arrests continue to take place, especially around Christmas time. It appears that whenever the authorities have gathered enough information on a group, they will arrest the members. CSW explained that the authorities are careful not to put charges on paper and that many are articulated verbally to those detained. In many cases, converts who are arrested will simply be questioned and released without charge, however as a result of the arrest, those individuals will be under surveillance afterwards. Those who are charged are done so with allegations of a political nature, like espionage or threats to the state.

CSW made reference to the case of Shahin Lahouti who was arrested on 12 October 2012 in a group of eight members when security forces raided a prayer meeting.<sup>18</sup> The group was sentenced on 16 July 2013 on charges of “action against the national security” and “propaganda against the order of the system”. One of the members was sentenced to six years, another member to five years, two other members to three years, and Shahin Lahouti together with another member to two and half years while the last two members received a one-year sentence. According to the information of CSW, Lahouti was released from prison just before Christmas in December 2013, with a warning to attend no more Christian activities and recently, he has been returned to prison.

---

<sup>18</sup> Mr Lahouti, a musician, was arrested along with seven other Christians during a raid on a prayer meeting in October 2012. They faced political charges, but were really arrested because of their conversion to Christianity. Shahin is a talented musician and well known for his generosity. He played concerts for autistic children, and regularly performs for charity. So despite the dangers he knew he faced after becoming a Christian in 2012, he decided to stay in Iran so he could continue helping people through his music, ref. CSW, *IRAN: Shahin Lahouti, released from prison*, 31/01 January 2014, available at <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=news&id=1962&search=>

Regarding the consequences for families of converts who are arrested, CSW said that in the situation where bail, often exorbitant (£120,000 was mentioned as an example), has been set, the family is often economically impacted. Often a deed to the family's property will be given up for bail. The fees set appear designed to financially cripple the family. Sometimes family members to detained converts are also harassed by the authorities as a means of intimidation. Another form of intimidation from the government towards converts who are in prison, is cancellation of family visits for no reason. On the subject of conditions for converts in prison, CSW has heard reports of use of torture and severe beatings from both prison personnel and inmates. Denial of or delayed medical treatment was mentioned by CSW as another example of the harsh conditions. It was added that on the other hand, it may be difficult to get accurate information on the real harshness conditions in prison as Christians who have been imprisoned on account of their faith do not go into detail regarding such type of information as they see themselves as 'suffering for the gospel' in much the same way as early Christians did and thus stay quiet about such issues. This phenomenon is not limited to Iranian Christians alone.

*Reference is made to 1.2*

### *3.2.2 Charges against house church members and leaders*

Asked about activities which could involve the risk of legal consequences, AIIS stated that most of the cases brought to their attention regarding persecution of Christian converts involve persons of a high profile and those who have the authority to gather people, or are perceived by the officials to possess such authority. This, however, does not exclude people who do not have that prominence. In terms of the treatment of converts by the authorities, it was considered by AIIS that, given the prevalence of torture and ill-treatment in the country, anyone who is arrested and detained could face the risk of being tortured or ill-treated at some point during his or her detention.

Most of the cases regarding converts that result in a trial and AIIS knows of, concern converts of a rather higher profile. It was considered that it is highly likely that individuals with a low profile are also arrested and detained for a period of time but are then released without the case going to a court. These individuals could face torture or other ill-treatment even within a short span of time in detention. However, AIIS does not learn of cases of those arrested for merely participating in house churches if such cases are not reported in the media or are brought to the organization's attention by family members or lawyers of the detainees. Iran remains a closed country to many human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and the Iranian authorities do not provide official figures on the arrests. As a result, individuals who do not have access to reporters, organizations or lawyers that can draw attention to their cases, are unlikely to be made known to an organization like Amnesty International.

Following the statements made by the Supreme leader and other leading officials regarding the fight against "deviant sects" in Iran in early 2011, there appears to be a renewed thrust towards persecution of members of religious minority groups, not just Christian converts, but also groups such as Sufis, Baha'is and Sunnis, including Sunni converts.

Mansour Borji explained that the authorities had difficulties in dealing with arrests of members from the official/registered churches, for instance the AOG church, concerning how to charge them. For members of house churches, the charges are different and it's easier for the authorities to accuse them of breaking the law. For instance they could be charged with having an illegal assembly or with consumption of alcohol consumed in connection with communion at a house church gathering.

The charges which Christian converts face since 2010 are mostly related to activities against national security as well as acting against the Islamic regime and insulting Islam. According to Mansour Borji, the



authorities arrest house church members due to proselytizing activities, however the charges put forward to such individuals involve charges of infringement of national security. Occasionally, there have been cases where charges have been related to both national security and house church organizing. Mansour Borji referred to the recent case of Saeed Abedini who had been convicted of anti-state activities due to his work with house churches and now serves a jail sentence of eight years' imprisonment. (Refer to p.24-25 )

Regarding the consequences for converts who are arrested by the authorities in connection with a raid on a house church gathering for example, CSW explained that the authorities are interested in keeping certain individuals for a longer period and may charge such individuals. Charges would typically be put against more prominent individuals, like perceived leaders of groups or networks, and he or she may risk being charged with acting against the Islamic order or of espionage or collaborating with foreign groups, all charges with political underpinnings to them. By charging the leaders, the authorities intend to intimidate the whole group. In the case of the recent arrest of a picnic gathering in March of 2014 (ref. note 12), the source explained that of the ten people arrested, eight were released with a warning shortly after arrest while two persons are still being held.

An international organisation in Turkey said that the authorities are not normally interested in ordinary converts. It is those who are proactive in establishing and maintaining church groups, in providing links with other groups and with churches in other countries, or in proselytizing in public or in a neighbourhood or work place that are of concern to the Iranian authorities. This, however, does not undermine the sanctions for converting to Christianity from Islam in the Islamic code, that conversion is illegal and ultimately punishable by death.

Concerning Yousef Naderkhani, the source said that he had recently been arrested again but had been released once more. The source said that the regime does not wish to execute converts. It would rather that they disappear from Iran. Therefore, effort is put into harassing them in order to make converts leave Iran. It was added that in general, one does not see that individuals are executed in Iran for political reasons. If a political opponent returns to Iran, he or she will be harassed by the authorities with the objective of getting him or her to leave the country. Some of the measures used by the authorities may be persecutory, while some may not. However, the harassment will be continuous. Generally, it was considered uncommon for the Iranian authorities to issue exit bans and moreover, the process for issuance of a ban is lengthy. If an exit ban has been issued preventing a person from leaving, there have been instances where a ban has been temporarily lifted through bribing of border authorities, thereby allowing travel outside of Iran.

Elam Ministries said that based on the cases the source has seen from Iran, there is evidence that the authorities would rather that the house church leaders leave the country. Often those detained are released on bail and families or others have put up property or business licenses in order for them to be released. Mostly, all are released and upon release, nearly all are given their passports back. A lot of testimonies indicate that the authorities would prefer that house church leaders leave Iran.

It was further stated that those who are released on bail may face difficulties upon release. Such an individual will lose his or her job as a consequence and may have difficulties renting a place to live. In the end they are under so much pressure that they have to leave the country. Additionally, the authorities are also in possession of whatever has been put up for bail. Reference was made to a recent case of a female house church leader who is now serving a sentence of three years imprisonment. She had been detained in Iran and was released on bail after two-three months. Her passport was returned to her but she did not leave the country. The authorities kept pressuring her to leave covertly, by stopping her from getting a job, rent a house or open a bank account and overtly, by following her in the streets. Finally after one year, she

left for Turkey. After much contemplation while in Turkey, she decided to go back to Iran. Upon return she was arrested and sentenced to three years imprisonment and has now served about seven or eight months of the term.

It was added that there have been cases regarding imprisoned converts to Christianity which have been covered widely in international media thus giving Iran bad press. Therefore, according to Elam Ministries the Iranian authorities prefer that converts leave Iran.

The types of charges that people involved in house churches are met with include involvement in activities against the security of the nation and disruption of the order of the regime, involvement with foreign powers and attending illegal meetings.

There have been a lot of arrests where many of those arrested have been released after a few days. The authorities will only keep those who they suspect to be house church- or network leaders. When a house church is raided, the authorities will detain the whole of the group and interrogate them often intimidating and threatening them with charges of apostasy but most often they are released without charges. Within the last few years, it seems that the authorities are using more severe measures towards house churches. Since they are more knowledgeable about the house churches they are investigating the churches more thoroughly, tapping telephones and watching house churches. According to the source, within the last three years, there has been a huge increase in arrests and house church leaders have been kept in jail up to ten months some even two to three years before they are out on bail which according to Elam Ministries indicates that the authorities wish to destroy the house church in every way possible.

Asked if the profile of the family to the convert would have any significance in relation to the authorities, Elam Ministries said that normally there would be more pressure on families with high ranking officials. In Iran it could have importance if someone in the extended family has a higher position. It was added that many Christian converts belong to lower or middle class families.

Regarding the activities involving risks of legal consequences in Iran, the representatives of the Union Church mentioned that house church leaders risk being charged with proselytizing, conversion/apostasy and for operating an unregistered church. As an example, the source referred to Saeed (Abedini, who is serving a prison sentence of eight years). The members of a house church may come and go, however the leader of a church is a constant which is why the authorities are intent on stopping the leader's activities.

*Reference is also made to 1.2*

## **4. Churches in Iran and converts**

### **4.1 Current circumstances/situation of existing Protestant and Evangelical Churches in Tehran and other cities**

When considering the major recent changes in Iran when it comes to conditions for Christians, an international organisation in Turkey mentioned that authorities have reportedly continued to put more pressure on the AOG churches. Initially, the authorities demanded that churches provide the names of the church-goers. Recently, the churches have been closed, with the excuse of renovation. When asked if any AOG churches in Iran remained open, the source stated that most are closed or have been closed at some

point. Whether or not some of the AOG churches, for example the one in Rasht, have been reopened is unknown to the source.

With regard to the current situation of existing Protestant and Evangelical Churches in Tehran and other cities in Iran, Mansour Borji informed the delegation that the Iranian authorities shut down the last three churches offering Farsi services in Tehran last year (in 2013). The source further explained that the Emmanuel Presbyterian Church and St Peter's Evangelical Church in Tehran were the last two official churches offering Farsi-language services. There are still a few churches in Rasht, Shiraz and Esfahan with a very small congregation but according to the source, the church in Rasht for example is closely monitored and the pastor is obliged to make regular reports to the authorities. They are not allowed to baptize or accept new Farsi-speakers into membership. The source concluded that there are essentially no churches offering services in Farsi over ground anymore.

The source added that this year (2014) is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the martyrdom of three pastors in Iran, Haik Hovsepian Mehr, Tataous Mikaelian and Mehdi Dibaj.

Mansour Borji explained that the demands from the Iranian authorities/MOIS on the Farsi-speaking churches have been increasing since 2010, starting with prohibition against baptism of new converts and having services on Fridays (the official weekly holiday) and the demands on churches to provide the authorities with IDs and other details of their Farsi-speaking members. The churches have also been asked to provide minutes from meetings of the church leadership and the church leaders have had to ask for permission to travel outside Iran. It was added that the demands put towards the Protestant churches since 2010, are similar to those that the churches endured in the 1990's.

The source further explained that the Emmanuel Church in Tehran was forced to minimize its activities a couple of years ago. The pastor tried to comply with some of the demands of the authorities while rejecting to provide the authorities with ID of the church attendants. The pastor was consequently forced to abandon his position and move to a smaller church with an Armenian congregation. In May 2013, the authorities required that the church services only be allowed in other languages than Farsi.

In May 2013, the Central Assemblies of God Church in Tehran, Iran's largest Persian language Evangelical church, was forcibly closed down and all its activities ceased. Prior to closure of the Central AOG Church in Tehran in May of 2013, the security forces arrested the pastor, Robert Asserian, and the church and his home were raided. The contents of AOG church library was confiscated by the authorities. Several books and other Christian literature in Farsi was taken away by the security forces and never returned. The pastor is still awaiting trial. The source said that many pastors are forced to leave Iran as they are pressured by the authorities through threats to family members, for example kidnapping of family members, rape of their daughters and similar violence.

The source said that since 2010, the Iranian authorities' actions against the Farsi-speaking churches have intensified. The source was of the opinion that the Iranian National Security Council at that time had made a decision to stop Farsi-speaking churches. In late 2010 and early 2011, the demands against the churches started and finally in 2013 the largest remaining churches were shut down.

According to the source, the task of implementing the decision taken by the National Security Council was handed to the Special Intelligence Branch of the Revolutionary Guard which has taken charge of dealing with Iranian Farsi speaking churches and converts to Christianity.

Mansour Borji further explained that today Iranian Christians have a limited access to Bibles and other materials. Before 2010, the Farsi-speaking churches had a library with Bibles and training materials, but

after 2010, when the Iranian authorities started raiding the churches, all the books and materials have been confiscated and Christian publications in Farsi have become a rare commodity. The source emphasized that Bibles and other Christian materials are available to the ethnic Christian minorities, Armenians and Assyrians which have permission to print in their own languages. Perhaps up until 2010, some limited use of materials was permitted in existing Farsi-speaking Churches, however since 2010, the Iranian authorities have made an effort towards eliminating worship in Farsi and towards eliminating the existence of Christian publications in Farsi.

Elam Ministries stated that in Iran there are recognized Christians, namely the Assyrian and Armenian Orthodox churches. These are not permitted to carry out evangelism and do not do so. Therefore conversion of Iranians - that is of Persians - is happening through the underground house churches in Iran because of the persecution Christians who convert face.

Elam explained that underground house churches in Iran are growing due to the fact that most Christians with a Muslim background are unable to go to the (Evangelical and Protestant) churches that exist over ground. For some years the authorities have been putting more and more pressure on the Evangelical and Protestant churches that exist over ground. Beforehand the authorities would focus their resources on targeting the pastors of those churches. Now, in the course of the past two or three years, the authorities have become more focused on restricting the churches themselves and shutting them down and therefore preventing Christians from congregating. In this effort, the pastors of these churches have first of all had to register their members on a list for the authorities and been compelled to limit their churches' congregation to this list. No new member was allowed to enter the church. Secondly, the churches were ordered not to carry out any activities outside of the church or activities directed at Persian-speaking persons. Only under these circumstances have these churches been able to exist during the last years. It was added that the Iranian authorities would prefer it if a wall was built around these churches. Currently, the main AOG church in Tehran has been shut down as have other AOG churches in Iran and some of their pastors have been forced to leave Iran.

It was explained that the AOG Church in Tehran was a very active church and used to have services up to four times a week. However, the church was forced to decrease the number of services, first from four to two and then from two to one a week. Because it was not allowed to let new members into their church, the church put its own guards outside the gates of the Church. Then the government started demanding the church to provide identification cards of their church-goers. Finally, the church was shut down completely. Two AOG Churches remain open, one of which is in Rasht. The St. Emmanuel church in Tehran has also closed its services recently and this is the case with St. Peters Church in Tehran as well. Not many churches provide services in Farsi anymore. The AOG church in Rasht still has services in Farsi, however it does not allow new members into its church. Elam added that Rasht has traditionally been a more liberal area which can explain why this church remains open. Whether Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox any church that starts up with activities in Farsi, will face trouble with the Iranian authorities.

The fact that the government shuts down the churches that do exist over ground, has led to the growth of house churches working under ground. It was explained that by closing the churches, the authorities control the situation of churches that exist over ground and are pushing converts to congregate in illegal churches, i.e. house churches.

Concerning the growing restrictions on Protestant churches that exist over ground in Iran, CSW said that the churches were harassed over a period of time and told to stop having services in Farsi as well as having services on Fridays. According to CSW, the last church conducting Farsi services was the Central AOG

church in Tehran whose pastor was arrested and the church closed in May of 2013. The Anglican Church in Tehran (St. Lucas) is still functioning, however without Farsi services.

#### **4.2 Links/relationship between existing Protestant and Evangelical churches and house churches**

An international organisation in Turkey informed the delegation that the AOG is a mainstream Pentecostal church and that earlier, the church was a starting point for converts to Christianity and that it was people connected to AOG who began establishing house churches. To the best knowledge of observers, the AOG did not authorize or approve informal networks or house churches, although it was observed that informal links were present through pastors and the house church pastors or leaders. It was added that converts would go to over ground churches, however the house churches became a safer place to meet due to growing restrictions on the churches legally operating in Iran.

Concerning the links between the existing over ground Protestant Churches and the house churches, Mansour Borji explained that the genesis of the house church movement came about around 2002 and intensified gradually due to the pressures on existing churches. An Iranian religious cleric even once stated that the house churches are a creation of the authorities' pressure on the existing churches. The pressure on churches eventually forced converts to go underground and gather in informal settings and thus come out of the authorities' reach.

CSW considered that the most prevalent denomination in Iran is Pentecostal and it was added that AOG ranks itself as Pentecostal. Asked if there were links between the churches that exist above ground and the house churches, the source said that Elam Ministries and AOG are both Pentecostal and have had links to one another. It was considered that most house churches that exist in Iran, would most likely be Protestant Evangelicals and some would be Presbyterian or Pentecostal.

When asked whether there are any links between house churches and the existing Protestant and Evangelical churches in Iran, Elam Ministries considered this was not likely. In any event, one would have to be very careful if affiliating with underground churches.

### **5. Activities in Turkey targeting Iranians**

The representatives of the Union Church informed the delegation that the activities of their church in Istanbul include a Refugee Service organized around a Service Committee funded by the church and operated by volunteers. The Committee also serves the needs of the people attending the Church, not just refugees/migrants. The service organizes groups for women and children ("Moms and Tots") where the children come and play while their mothers are in various discussion groups including pre-natal and post-natal care. The Refugee Service also provides clothing and household items which are donated by the members of the church and by the general ex-pat community, refers patients to hospitals and helps to pay for their treatment as well as providing some financial assistance for renting and heating of houses and gift cards to Turkish supermarkets. The services are targeted towards refugees and migrants from all countries and religions.

Asked how Iranians get in contact with the Union Church [in Turkey], the source said that it is most often by "word of mouth". A volunteer is also in contact with UNHCR and aids asylum seekers in preparing their

cases and while UNHCR is processing their cases. The Church also helps people with referrals who are going to be resettled in third countries.

The Union Church belongs to a network of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant parishes that aids asylum seekers while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is processing their cases. When the service started in the late 1990's, it served a number of Iranians, but now it includes a variety of nationalities, including Syrians and Afghans, many of the Afghans resided for a long period in Iran. There are fewer Iranians now because of the government's sending them to satellite cities. The Church added that it had probably assisted 50 or 60 Iranians in the past year in some way.

The representatives of the Union Church said that in 2005 they (not the church, but the representatives themselves) were dealing exclusively with Iranians but now the group they serve is more mixed. The church is offering Bible discussions to members of the community (not necessarily refugees). The activities are organized around a loose network of people connected to the Union Church, other churches and volunteers. When believers come from Iran [to Turkey], they meet with local believers for Bible discussions, worship and fellowship.

The representatives of the Union Church explained that many Iranian Christians are connected via satellite TV and internet to some Iranian Christian Protestant Churches in the US, and in Canada. These American and Canadian churches broadcast to Iran, but the churches are quiet about any in-country links to Iran.

### 5.1 Conversion in Turkey

An international organisation in Turkey explained that the Catholic and Anglican churches in Turkey apply certain standards when it comes to allowing persons to convert often involving two years of active church attendance before considering candidates for conversion. However, other churches have been established to meet the needs of refugee groups and they are therefore more active in the conversion of certain refugees.

Concerning the Armenian Protestant Church in Gedik Pasa in Istanbul, the source explained that the church has come to host large and diverse groups of Iranian converts, including Pentecostals.

The source mentioned that the organisation had been approached by one of the old established churches in Ankara which was concerned about being used by many refugees who may not all have the intention of undergoing a genuine conversion.

It was added that some of the churches in Turkey are using all possible facilities to baptize Iranians who wish to convert. Concerning training of candidates for baptism, the source said that some churches have obligatory training before baptism, however, some churches do not require training before allowing individuals to be baptized. Generally, priests do prefer that candidates for baptism attend training, however there may be Iranians in Turkey who in Iran have had an affiliation to a house church or are somehow convincing in their Christian outlook. There is also an increase in internet-based baptism and documentation of baptism.

Concerning the sur place conversions of Iranians in Turkey, it was observed that a church or Christian organization working among Iranians presents a place where an Iranian can get in touch with other Iranians and can therefore be appealing. Iranians may go to Church simply to meet with other Iranians. When an Iranian converts to Christianity while in Turkey, it may not always be the last resort for him or her to have a

chance for recognition or reopening of his or her asylum case. An Iranian that believes in God, or is interested, may visit a Church in order to experience something different. Additionally, some churches also proselytize to Iranians who are newcomers to Turkey.

According to ASAM, many Iranians may change religion as a strategy since they believe that to obtain asylum in that way would be easier in the international protection system. However, it was also mentioned that some Iranian asylum seekers get in contact with the churches in Turkey because the churches are assisting them and provide room for socializing with other refugees/ asylum seekers. At the churches they meet other Iranians who are in a similar position. Upon coming into contact with the church communities and learning more about Christianity, some may decide to convert. The source added that there are also some humanitarian organizations with religious characteristics that are providing assistance to refugees.

Regarding the conversion of Iranians to Christianity, the representatives of the Union Church found that in the past, up until eight years ago, some churches [in Turkey] were acting as a “paper factory” issuing certificates of baptism to Iranians coming out of Iran without ascertaining the validity of their conversions.

According to the source, the UNHCR therefore is presently skeptical about people who convert after coming to Turkey, this is improving as the agency feels more confident about any recommendation from churches that they know. Although such a conversion may be sincere, as it may be the first time a convert is around other Christians, the UNHCR is quite skeptical of these conversions. The Union Church of Istanbul itself has a strict procedure when it comes to accepting candidates for baptism in the church. In order to become a candidate, an individual must attend the church for one year before he or she is allowed to enter the preparation for baptism which involves three months of discipleship. Additionally, he or she must exhibit behavior that demonstrates that he or she is committed to becoming a Christian. The church does not issue any documentation for baptism for refugees in most instances.

A non-governmental organisation in Turkey informed the delegation that there seems to be an increase in cases regarding Christian converts. The NGO employee said that based on the information shared by the refugees, the practicing of Christianity in Iran is highly restricted and goes on very secretly. Christian converts are kept under surveillance and there is an air of oppression against them. Iranian Christian converts who come to Turkey even feel they are at risk of surveillance by Iranian agents in Turkey. According to the organization, in few cases Iranians state that they have been secretly baptized in Iran. Others wait to go abroad to be baptized.

According to the representatives from the Union Church, being baptized does not in itself create a problem for Iranians - it is the fact that they are Christians that creates a problem for them. Baptism is a public confirmation of their faith. When they come to Turkey to meet with other believers, Iranians engage in Bible discussions with local Iranians or people from other countries. When they return to Iran, they return at risk but the fact that they have been baptized is secondary and their situation is not worse because they were baptized if it is not known. If it is known they were baptized, then this is confirmation of their “apostasy”. Baptism requires witnesses, so this is always a risk. About the situation of returnees, the source said, that they had only anecdotal information and that the stories were impossible to verify.

Regarding the profile of the Iranians who attend the worship and fellowship activities in Turkey, the source explained that it varies: some come in the first week they are in Turkey while others may have stayed in Turkey for a while before showing up. Iranian believers may come to Turkey and meet with other Iranian

believers for various Bible discussions and fellowship purposes. Iranians typically take two or three years to convert; they are very thorough in their investigation of a new religion.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the source explained that conversion is a spiritual thing of the heart which has nothing to do with quoting the Bible, knowing Christian songs or holidays or the like. What is essential is that a convert can explain what happened to him/her, how he/she became a Christian and how it has changed his or her life, as well as being able to explain how others can come to Christianity. The source emphasized that there is a big difference between acting like a Christian and true belief and that anyone can study the Bible.

Elam Ministries considered that conversion is a hard decision and therefore training is so critical. When Iranians are trained by Elam outside of Iran, the teachers who do the training are carefully selected by Elam so that they have the necessary qualifications. Aside from biblical studies, Elam puts a lot of emphasis on character as well as relational issues in the training that is provided to leaders or soon to be leaders. Elam Ministries considered that a lot of Iranians are open to Christianity. First of all many are disillusioned with Islam. Concerning how a person converts, it was explained that when converting to Christianity from Islam, the first few months involve a period of discipleship in which the person who has lead them to Christ plays a role and he or she is one that the convert looks up to. It was explained that Elam does not preach a specific denomination as Muslims who come to Christ do not belong to any. Elam wishes to make sure that the converts are brought up biblically.

When asked whether an individual could choose to be baptized in a house church setting in Iran, Elam Ministries said that if it does happen that individuals are baptized, it would happen very secretly. Converts are baptized outside of Iran, for example, and sometimes mass baptisms take place as well. 246 were baptized recently in a mass baptism in the region and it is possible that some were Iranians that were returning to Iran.

### **5.2 Return to Iran after conversion, incl. behavior upon return**

According to an international organisation in Turkey there are reportedly large numbers of Iranians in Turkey who are involved in informal house church movements with links to similar networks in Iran. Available information to international organizations monitoring the situation in Iran suggests that persons who come to the notice of the authorities on account of their conversion to Christianity are interrogated in relation to perceived threats to society and to the Iranian regime, such as unqualified threats to public order or insults to Islamic sanctities as understood under Iranian law.

When asked if an international organisation in Turkey considered it would make a difference if a person had been trained or baptized in Turkey or in an European country, the source said that if it only concerns conversion, there would probably be no difference. If baptism is uncovered, it could pose problems for the individual. The person's link to a network abroad would also raise the profile. However, there are no reports of persons who have been detained and officially charged with conversion-related offences after returning to Iran from Turkey.

---

<sup>19</sup> The representatives from the Union Church added that if the refugees apply for asylum in Turkey, they wait for two to three years before their case is processed. Since 2006-07, the government of Turkey has enforced that asylum seekers must live in the satellite cities. If they do not stay there they are unable to receive government assistance and may also risk fines and arrests if they go to other areas where they do not have permission to reside. This makes for a more fluid group of refugees in Istanbul at any one time.



According to the source, there are reports of Iranian authorities having agents or informants in some of the churches in Turkey. However, it was added that it was not sure whether the Iranian authorities were capable of and resourceful enough to monitor those who are visiting Turkey in order to get baptized, for example, in a systematic way.

However, it was added that if a person is known to be a US trained pastor, he or she would be under more scrutiny when coming to Iran. Given the large number of Iranians visiting and residing in Turkey, it is less likely that such a person is identified, unless announced through Christian internet or broadcasting media. It is also reported that the authorities are briefly questioning selected persons upon arrival in Iran at entry points, especially if they breached the terms of their stay in Turkey in some way, with regards to their activities and links in Turkey.

Regarding risks to individuals who return to Iran after having received religious training in Turkey, AIIIS said that it was possible that Iranian security officials were monitoring activities that take place in Turkey. It was considered that generally, it is probably easier to monitor what goes on in Turkey due to the geographical proximity and the ease with which Iranians can travel to Turkey.

Elam Ministries stated that the organization knows of many cases of individuals who came for training in Turkey who upon return to Iran, were immediately arrested. Over 500 individuals that were connected to Elam have been arrested and interrogated for shorter or longer periods, within the past three years, and within the past year, the number has been about 200 individuals. The reason behind this high number is that the authorities have obtained quite a bit of information about how the house churches operate. It also seems that the Iranian authorities have agents in Turkey that know of what work Elam is doing there.

When asked when people who return from training or other activities in Turkey are taken in by the authorities, Elam Ministries said that it could be at the airport or on the road after passing back into Iran or a few days after returning. The participants in these sorts of training are most often house church leaders or emerging house church leaders who have ministry potential. Due to the fact that the targeting of persons returning from training in Turkey has been intensified, Elam has changed its approach on training in Turkey and basically stopped it. Therefore, the training for individuals who are going back to Iran is done in other places for security reasons. It is the impression of Elam, that the Iranian authorities through investigation and research have connected a jigsaw puzzle on how the house church movement in Iran works. It seems that the Iranian authorities have interrogated and imprisoned so many house church leaders that their security system now is very knowledgeable about what they do.

According to CSW, it has also been reported that an individual who had been baptized in Turkey in 2011 was arrested upon return to Iran and sentenced to six years with charges of “propagating against the regime”. It was claimed that he was demonstrating that there was a lack of freedom in Iran because he had been baptized in Turkey.<sup>20</sup> He was accused of holding regular meetings with Muslim converts to Christianity, distributing Bibles among the youth, having contact with Zionist satellite TV channels, and being a member of a cult.

When asked what obstacles a convert to Christianity faces in Iran, the representatives of the Union Church considered that if a convert returns to Iran, he or she lives in fear of being discovered. A convert can also risk losing his or her assets if their conversion is disclosed. They can be arrested for apostasy. If they flee

---

<sup>20</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, Christian Convert Imprisoned for Holding Baptism in Turkey, December 14, 2011, available at <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/12/sevedi/>

the country, or if they skip on bail, their properties are at risk of confiscation. It is not easy to obtain information on what goes on once a convert returns to Iran as the Union Church does not have access inside Iran. For the last two years, it has been difficult for foreign believers to visit Iran – either they have been denied visas or it has become too dangerous for them. Earlier it was easier for South Korean believers to work in Iran, as South Korea have diplomatic relations with Iran.

According to the source the Iranian secret police are reported to be active in Istanbul. Many Iranians who approach the church are cautious and will often use a different name from their own because they fear that news of their contact with other believers will pass on to Iran.

*Reference is also made to 1.6*

### **5.3 Christian conferences and training seminars in Turkey directed at Iranians**

An international organisation in Turkey said that members of the Iranian Diaspora who have been trained as pastors visit Iran and organize house churches, and Iranians who wish to convert travel to Turkey for baptism. Thousands of Iranians are baptized in Turkey and many are trained in Turkey as well as in countries like Azerbaijan and Armenia and Georgia where there are hundreds of conferences targeting Christian converts. There are also some events that take place in Dubai directed at Iranians who wish to convert, on a smaller scale.

Those who come for training in Turkey or other countries are usually community leaders. It was not considered that such an individual who travels to Turkey or other countries for training would be identified at that point, as Iranians can easily travel as tourists in these countries. In these countries, leaders can meet with fellow Christians and establish networks to other house church groups in Iran.

Concerning activities carried out by Christian organizations directed towards Iranians in Turkey, the source considered from personal observations, that there is an increase in the number of people who are trained in Turkey by churches based in the US and of people who are converted.

Elam Ministries stated that the training that Elam conducts in Turkey is for individuals who reside in Turkey. There have been some indications that some of Elam's activities have come under surveillance by Iranian authorities and Elam has been warned of this from different parties. There has been a change in approach in the last 12 months with regards to how and where training of leaders who return to Iran can take place. Training in Turkey for such individuals was completely stopped in 2013 and now the training takes place in other locations.

Generally, the amount of training that Elam provides outside of Iran has increased many fold and other activities that have grown include production and translation of bibles. The source explained that Elam ministries have translated a new version of the whole Bible now which is printed in various locations. There has been a distinct increase in the number of Bibles distributed in the Iran region, with over 14,000 being distributed during the period of Persian New Year where Iranians take holidays abroad.

## **Organizations, authorities and persons consulted**

### **Amnesty International International Secretariat**

Bahareh Davis, Researcher, Iran Team, Middle East and North Africa Programme

Nassim Papayianni, Campaigner, Middle East and North Africa Programme

### **Article 18**

Mansour Borji, Advocacy Officer

The Article 18 initiative of the United Council of Iranian Churches is a human rights organization working with religious freedom through advocacy.

### **Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM)**

ASAM was established in Ankara in 1995 and is the implementing partner of UNHCR's Turkey office. The main objective of ASAM is to develop solutions to the problems that refugee and asylum seekers encounter and to support them in meeting their basic needs. ASAM also carries out analyses of national and international crisis in order to predict national and international migration movements.

### **Christian Solidarity Worldwide**

Christian Solidarity Worldwide is a Christian organization working for religious freedom through advocacy and human rights. The organization obtains information on the conditions in Iran and persecution of Christians through contacts with church networks in Iran both directly and indirectly.

### **Elam Ministries**

Golnar Jamieson, Children Ministries Director

An Elam Trustee

An Iranian network leader based in Turkey

An Iranian pastor based in Turkey

### **An international organisation in Turkey**

### **A non-governmental organisation in Turkey**

### **Small Media**

Small Media is an action lab helping the free flow of information and creative expression in closed societies, with training, technology and research initiatives that focus on Iran.

### **Union Church, Istanbul**

The Union Church belongs to a network of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant parishes that aids asylum seekers while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is processing their cases. The activities of The Union Church in Istanbul include a Refugee Service organized around a Service Committee funded by the church and operated by volunteers.

## Bibliography

Akcapar Sebnem Koser, *Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey*, *International Migration Review*, Volume 40, Issue 4, pages 817–853, December 2006

Amnesty International, *Silenced, Expelled, Imprisoned, Repression of Students and Academics in Iran*, June 2014, available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/015/2014/en/a44b334a-cbcb-468d-a2f8-e3e66ce9e939/mde130152014en.pdf>

Amnesty International, Urgent Action, Iran: Further information: *Jail sentence for Iranian student: Maryam Shafi' Pour*. (MDE 13/022/2014, 25 April 2014) available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/022/2014/en>

Amnesty International, Urgent Action, Iran: *Student jailed after refusal to spy: Hamid Babaei*, (MDE 13/011/2014, 21 February 2014) available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/011/2014/en>

Amnesty International, Urgent Action, Iran: Further information: *Hunger striker's health now critical: Nasrin Sotoudeh*, (MDE 13/071/2013) available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/071/2012/en>

Amnesty International, report, *Iran: Repression of dissent intensifies in run-up to presidential election*, (MDE 13/021/ 2013, 12 June 2013) available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/021/2013/en>

Amnesty International, *Iran: Jailed blogger's health worsening*, 10 January 2014, MDE 13/002/2014, available at: <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE13/002/2014/en>

Amnesty International, *Iran: Naderkhani acquittal shows urgent need to allow religious freedom*, 11 September 2012, available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/iran-naderkhani-acquittal-shows-urgent-need-allow-religious-freedom-2012-09-11>.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *Iran, Eight Christians arrested and interrogated*, March 7, 2014, available at <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=1669>

Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *Iran: Shahin Lahouti released from prison*, 31/01 January 2014, available at <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=news&id=1962&search=>

Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *Four Christians sentenced to 80 lashes each for drinking communion wine*, October 23, 2013, available at: <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=press&id=1595>

Danish Immigration Service, Danish Refugee Council and Norwegian LANDINFO, *Iran, On Conversion to Christianity, Issues concerning Kurds and Post-2009 Election Protestors as well as Legal Issues and Exit Procedures*, Joint report from the Danish Immigration Service, the Norwegian LANDINFO and Danish Refugee Council's fact-finding mission to Tehran, Iran, Ankara, Turkey and London, United Kingdom 9 November to 20 November 2012 and 8 January to 9 January 2013, available at: <http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/A8C2C897-1CA9-49D1-BA32-EC3E599D646D/0/Iranendeligudgave.pdf>

International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, *Christian Convert Imprisoned for Holding Baptism in Turkey*, December 14, 2011, available at <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/12/seyedi/>

International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, *Imprisoned Pastor Chained to Hospital Bed, Wife Says*, March 17, 2014, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2014/03/abedini-chained-hospital/>

UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 18 March 2014, A/HRC/25/61, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/534e4d0d4.html>

## ANNEX 1: TERMS OF REFERENCE

### 1. Converts to Christianity

- a) Consequences of conversion in relation to the authorities
  - Obstacles with regard to education, employment as well as dealings/contact with the authorities
  - Activities involving risks of legal consequences:
    - Significance of a convert's profile/his or her family's profile
    - Prevalence of cases of converts punished by law
    - Consequences for priests or other persons involved in a conversion process
- b) Consequences of conversion with regard to a convert's relation to family and social network
  - Risks of maltreatment from other actors/ surrounding community
- c) Possibility/feasibility of practising a Christian life (marriage, baptism) and possible restrictions on one's public behaviour
  - Limitations with regard to a convert's Christian activities/tolerance of Christian activities
  - Consequences of abstaining from Muslim rituals/activities (mosque attendance etc.)
  - Situation of converts with and without a Christian network
- d) Urban and rural differences with regards to how converts are treated by both the authorities and the surrounding community
- e) Situation of converts who return to Iran after having converted abroad, i.e. in Europe/Western countries
  - Situation of converts without affiliation to a Christian network

### 2. Use of internet among converts to Christianity

- a) Significance of internet among converts to Christianity, incl. types of online activities and how internet is used
- b) Significance of internet in house church communities
- c) To what degree online activities of individual converts are monitored by the authorities and possible risks involved

### 3. House Churches

- a) House churches, structure/organisation of house churches and activities
  - Diversity among house churches with regard to religious outlook
  - Ways of coming in contact with and becoming a member of a house church, incl. precautions taken by house churches

- Activities within house churches, incl. baptism within house churches

b) To what degree house churches are monitored and raided by authorities

- Cases of house church members and house church leaders being arrested and punished by the authorities

#### 4. Churches in Iran and converts

a) Current circumstances/situation of existing Protestant and Evangelical Churches in Tehran and other cities

- Government measures/restrictions towards the churches
- Churches that still have Farsi services
- Churches that accept Muslims who wish to convert and have activities directed towards Muslims

b) Links/relationship between existing Protestant and Evangelical churches (incl. Armenian Protestant Churches) and house churches

#### 5. Activities in Turkey targeting Iranians

a) "Immigration churches"/Christian congregations in Istanbul and Ankara with visible Iranian communities

- Background of the churches
- Links to churches in Iran, incl. house churches
- Current programme towards Iranian migrants – what do the churches offer Iranian migrants?
- Dynamics of the congregation, flow of members (size etc.) and interaction within various networks in Turkey

b) Conversion in Turkey

- Profile of converts (length of stay in Turkey etc.)
- Process of conversion in Turkey
- Documentation of conversion?
- Return to Iran after conversion, incl. behavior upon return
  - Consequences of abstaining from Muslim rituals/activities (mosque attendance etc.)
  - Possibility of practicing Christian activities upon return and to which extent?

c) Christian conferences and training seminars in Turkey directed at Iranians

- Profile of participants (congregation leaders/house church leaders/individuals)
- Content and objectives of seminars/conferences
- Return to Iran after participation?