

Report

Iran: Christians and Converts



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SUMMARY

This report concerns the subject of Christians and Christian converts in The Islamic Republic of Iran. After providing a brief overview of religious minorities and Christian Churches in Iran, the report turns to discuss apostasy in relation to Islam and Islamic Law and apostasy in the context of Iranian Law. The final chapter gives an outline of some key practical realities and concerns of converts in Iran, and provides a number of references to recent events concerning conversion. It is based on information provided by both public and non-public sources.

SAMMENDRAG

Denne rapporten omhandler temaet kristne og kristne konvertitter i den islamske republikken Iran. Det gis en kort oversikt over religiøse minoriteter og kristne kirker i Iran, etterfulgt av en diskusjon om apostasi (frafall fra islam) sett i lys av islam og islamsk lov og deretter i lys av iransk lov. Det siste kapitlet gir en oversikt over aktuelle problemstillinger og hendelser vedrørende konvertering i Iran. Notatet bygger på offentlige og ikke-offentlige kilder.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report is an updated version of the report *General information on Christians and converts in Iran*, published 10 June 2009 (Landinfo 2009). The report provides a general description of Christian minorities in Iran, with focus on issues pertaining to apostasy from Islam, evangelical Christians and converts.

The report is based on public and non-public sources. Some of the information has been collected from relevant sources in the context of fact-finding missions to Iran. These sources are mainly Iranian, and belong to various religious minorities. In their encounters with Landinfo they have described how they perceive their situation. The conversations were held on the condition that the identity and religious affiliation of the sources would not be disclosed. This report will attempt to communicate the information and impressions from these conversations.

2. ABOUT IRAN

2.1 RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND THEIR POSITION IN IRANIAN SOCIETY

Iran is home to more than 70 million people. Shia Muslims represent the majority, but the country also has a substantial Sunni Muslim minority. Real figures for non-Muslim minorities are not publicly available. However, it is commonly assumed that Iran had approximately 300,000 Christians in 1979, but that the current figure is somewhere between 80,000 and 200,000 Christians. The majority of Christian Iranians live in Tehran, Tabriz and Isfahan. Tehran has 25 registered Christian churches, including Armenians, Assyrians, Protestants, Adventists, Catholics and Orthodox Christians (Norwegian Embassy, e-mail 2009).

Approximately 25,000 Jews and approximately 25,000 Zoroastrians are assumed to live in Iran, but the real figures are not publicly available. The majority of Iranian Jews live in Tehran; the remaining ones are mainly in Shiraz and Isfahan. The number of Baha'i is not known either, but they are reported to have numbered approximately 300,000 in 1979, and are still assumed to constitute the largest religious minority in Iran. Baha'i is prohibited in Iran, they are regarded as Muslim heretics and members of a political sect, and they are treated in violation of international law and human rights (Norwegian Embassy, e-mail 2009).

Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism are all legal and accepted religions according to the Iranian constitution. As “people of the book” (*ahl al-kitab*), Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians have an assured religious status and specific rights in accordance with Islamic principles (U.S. Department of State 2011; Kari Vogt 1997, p. 74; Simpson & Shubart 1995, p. 221). In practice, this means that they can practise their religion and determine civil law issues such as marriage, divorce, responsibility for children and inheritance according to Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian family law. They are ensured seats in Parliament, and can swear oaths on

their holy books.¹ They have their own institutions, day-care centres, schools (the activities are monitored by the authorities) and NGOs that are engaged in culture, family issues and welfare. The Jewish community in Tehran also operates a private hospital. Young men of conscription age are called in for military service on an equal basis with other Iranians, but are barred from making a military career. Christians and Zoroastrians normally experience no problems in obtaining a passport or an exit visa; the same applies to evangelical Christians, including converts (UNHCR in Ankara, meeting in March 2011).

On the other hand, apostasy from Islam and evangelization towards Muslims is strictly forbidden and may entail capital punishment (AFP 2011; FIDH 2010, p. 25). Import, printing and distribution of non-Muslim religious literature are strongly restricted. There is little doubt that non-Muslim minorities in general are vulnerable groups in the Islamic Republic. They are exposed to varying degrees of social, financial and legal discrimination in comparison to Iranian Muslims. In practice, non-Muslims are barred from positions in public administration. Certain types of jobs and positions are reserved for Shia Muslims.² Non-Muslims cannot work in the legal system, the security services or hold the position of headmaster in the public school system (Norwegian Embassy, 2009). In a private legal conflict with a Muslim, the non-Muslim will be the weaker party, since Iranian law favours Muslims. This applies especially to cases involving inheritance or indemnification, in which a Muslim will be favoured over a non-Muslim. A non-Muslim man cannot marry a Muslim woman, and a non-Muslim woman automatically becomes a Muslim after marrying a Muslim Iranian man (FIDH 2010, p. 8; priest in Iran, meeting in January 2009). Further, in the criminal justice system a non-Muslim man who has sexual intercourse with an unmarried Muslim woman will risk capital punishment, while a Muslim man who has sexual intercourse with an unmarried Muslim woman will risk flogging (FIDH 2010, p. 9).

2.2 MIGRATION AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

During the 1990s and until today, many Christians have left Iran.³ Key causes have been the Iran-Iraq war in 1980-88, the difficult economic situation with enduring high unemployment and inflation, problems with access to higher education, dissatisfaction with the regime and a desire for more social freedom and a better life (Kamyab 2007; Kari Vogt 1997, p. 77). An increasing number of Iranians, in particular young middle-class people from urban backgrounds with high education, have distanced themselves from the manner in which Islam is interpreted and forced upon the Iranian population. Instead, they have sought religious community and development elsewhere, for example in Sufi brotherhoods (Islamic mysticism), travel to India, yoga or conversion to Orthodox Christianity, allowing them to seek refuge in monasteries on Greek islands (The Jerusalem Report 2007). Other circumstances, such as Armenia's naturalization act, which grants an opportunity for citizenship to Iranian Armenians and the liberal visa practices in the US with regard to Iranian non-

¹ Three seats are reserved for Christians (two for Armenians, one for Assyrians), one seat for Jews and one for Zoroastrians.

² This means that Sunni Muslims also are excluded from holding certain offices and positions.

³ This also applies to other non-Muslim groups and a large number of Iranian Muslims.

Muslim minorities, have provided good opportunities for Christians to emigrate. The American organization Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) has helped Iranian Jews as well as Christians and Zoroastrians to immigrate to the US (priest in Iran, meeting in January 2009). Iranian Christians also make use of tourist visas or hire traffickers to be able to apply for asylum in Europe.

Religious minorities also apply for asylum at the UNHCR in Turkey. In a meeting with Landinfo, UNHCR (meeting in Ankara, March 2011) reported that Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey in 2010 could be divided into three groups, whereof religious minorities constitute the largest one. The Baha'i account for approximately 50 per cent of this group; some of these are converts to Baha'i. The remaining are from various minorities, whereof Christian converts are in the majority. Some asylum seekers report to have converted to Christianity in Iran, while others convert after arriving in Turkey.

The UNHCR office in Eastern Turkey reported that they received applications for asylum from Iranian converts (meeting in Van, March 2011). UNHCR estimated that approximately 20-25 per cent of the asylum seekers reported that they are converts. Some of them have converted in Iran; others are baptized in Van during the processing of their application for asylum. A common feature of Iranian converts in Ankara and Van is that they almost without exception are ethnic Persians and were previously Shia Muslims.

2.3 MISSIONARY ACTIVITY WITH REGARD TO IRANIAN MUSLIMS IN IRAN AND TURKEY

According to UNHCR (meeting in Ankara, March 2011), many American evangelical churches have become established in Iran by way of the Internet and Skype. Furthermore, there are more than ten Iranian churches in Turkey. Western missionaries, British and American in particular, undertake highly targeted activities with regard to Iranian asylum seekers. The Turkish authorities do not interfere in the missionary activities, because of the secular character of the Turkish state.

UNHCR in Van (meeting in March 2011) also confirms that there were Christian groups in the city, and that foreigners undertake missionary activity and social work among Persian-speaking Afghan and Iranian asylum seekers and refugees.

This information concurs with what the Danish immigration authorities stated in their report on Iran from 2009 (Danish Refugee Council & Danish Immigration Service 2009, p. 33-34). According to the report, it is possible to convert "online" from Iran. Iranians could contact TV stations based in the US and receive religious instruction, a certificate of baptism and a recommendation from American churches. In addition, evangelists from the UK undertook active missionary work on the Turkish side of the Turkish-Iranian border.

According to a research article by Sebnem Koser Akcapar (2006, p. 820), Iranian Christian International (ICI) is the most important and well-known foreign Christian organization in Turkey. It was established for the purpose of undertaking missionary activity among Persian-speaking Iranian and Afghan refugees. In addition, Akcapar refers to the British Elam Ministries, an evangelical network that trains and sends missionaries to work among Persian-speakers in several countries, including Turkey. The missionary activities are focused on speakers of Persian who are negatively socio-economically affected and in a difficult life situation.

On its website, the ICI on the other hand states that it is a network of more than 300 organizations, congregations and missionaries in more than 30 countries. The organization also produces and sells a comprehensive range of Christian materials, with content in English, Persian, Dari (and Afghan dialect of Persian) and Pashtu (Iranian Christian International n.d.a).

Elam Ministries' website reports that this network is found in the UK and the US, and that leaders and other volunteers are sent out to strengthen existing churches, establish new congregations and to provide relief to the poor and oppressed. Elam Ministries also seek to spread the Gospel to Iran by way of the media, primarily through TV and the Internet (Elam n.d.a.).

3. CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN IRAN

In a report on discrimination of ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH 2010, p. 25) wrote that in general, the Christians in Iran can be subdivided into two groups, ethnic and non-ethnic. The ethnic group comprises Armenian and Assyrian-Chaldean Christians. Most of the non-ethnic Christians belong to Evangelical and other Protestant churches, and many are converts from Islam.

The established Armenian and Assyrian churches have to a large extent conformed to the restrictions imposed on non-Muslim religious practices. The churches are therefore allowed to operate with little interference from the authorities. Evangelical congregations, on the other hand, are closely monitored, and church leaders have been coerced into signing declarations of refraining from missionary activities, or letting Muslims be present during church service. Strong restrictions are also imposed on printing and distribution of Christian writings (U.S. Department of State 2010).

3.1 ARMENIAN AND ASSYRIAN CHURCHES

The vast majority of the Iranian Christians are Armenian and belong to the Apostolic Armenian church. The Armenian church is a national and ethnically based church, which uses Armenian as its liturgical language. The church does not evangelize, nor does it accept Muslim converts. The history of the Armenian minority in Iran goes back many centuries, and in general the Armenians are very aware of their ethnic affiliation and their religious and cultural heritage.

The Assyrian and Chaldean (Catholic) churches are also ethnically based and use Aramaic as its liturgical language. According to Eliz Sanasarian (2000, p. 43), the official Iranian press has referred to the churches as the "Assyrian Church of the East" and the "Chaldean Catholic Church". Like the Armenian church, the Assyrian and Chaldean churches loyally follow the Iranian authorities' instructions of restricting their religious activities to their own ranks. Also like the Armenians, the Iranian Assyrians are highly aware of their ethnic affiliation and their religious and cultural heritage.

The current number of Assyrians in Iran is not publicly known, but according to Eliz Sanasarian (2000, p. 43), they numbered approximately 30,000 in the mid-1970s. At least half of them were resident in Tehran, while approximately 40 per cent of the remaining lived in and around the town of Urumieh in the province of Western Azerbaidjan. During the 1990s, their number fell to somewhere between 16,000 and 18,000. The US report on religious freedom for 2010 estimates the number of Assyrian Christians to somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 (U.S. State Department 2010).

3.2 PROTESTANT AND EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

The Protestant churches are closely associated with prior Western missionary activity (Eliz Sanasarian 200, p. 43, 44). The churches comprise six small congregations in Tehran with branches in other cities. In 1986, the churches established the Council of Iranian Protestant Churches. According to Simpson & Shubart (1995, p. 233), these six Protestant churches had a total of approximately 15,000 followers in 1995. In his research paper, Sebnem Koser Akcapar (2006, p. 823) refers to a similar figure from 2001, when the Protestant churches were assumed to have had somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 members. The report on religious freedom from the US State Department states that there are fewer than 10,000 Protestants in Iran. However, the report remarks that many Protestants practise their faith in secret (U.S. State Department 2010).

Three of the Protestant churches in the Council evangelize among Muslims and accept in principle – occasionally also in practice – Muslims who wish to convert to Christianity. The members come from various ethnic backgrounds, and the majority are either converts or children of Muslim converts. The churches are charismatic and define themselves as part of the Christian tradition of martyrdom. Their liturgical language is Persian, which in itself represents a problem in their relationship with Iranian authorities, who wish that Christian liturgy should be in minority languages.

Muslims who have sought out the established and registered Evangelical churches have needed to go through a long and thorough training before their baptism. The churches have wished to make sure that the candidate is a sincere believer. The fear of provocateurs, concerns for the safety of the church and the congregation and the possibility of tactical conversions, i.e. the use of conversion as a strategy for migration, have also caused this careful approach by the churches.

3.3 CATHOLIC AND ORTHODOX CHURCHES

Most of the Catholics are assumed to live in Tehran, where there are seven Catholic churches, whereof four are Latin. The Catholics have close ties to the Vatican embassy in Tehran. According to Simpson & Shubart (1995, p. 233), Catholics have lived in Iran since the 19th century.

The Catholic church in Iran does not evangelize, nor does it baptize Muslims. Previously, conversions are reported to have occurred, but only rarely. At the time, the church took the attitude of not rejecting Muslims who wished to convert, but neither did it encourage anyone. Those who insisted were allowed to attend mass and receive instruction. The requirements for training and practice were very strict, and three to five years could pass before the church would possibly agree to a baptism. The long training period – which is common throughout the Catholic church – was

also a result of the fact that after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the church was visited by many Iranians who wished to convert for more or less tactical reasons, with a view to ensuring easier access to visas to Western countries (Iranian priest, meeting in November 2007).

Members of the Russian-Orthodox and Greek-Orthodox churches are assumed to be mainly foreign citizens resident in Iran. The Greek-Orthodox church is at one point reported to have had approximately 6,000 Iranian members, but in 2007, it was assumed that only 20-30 remained in Iran (The Jerusalem Report 2007). The Orthodox churches do not undertake missionary work towards Muslims.

4. CONVERTS AND HOUSE CHURCHES

4.1 NUMBER OF CONVERTS

There are no reliable figures available on the number of converts living in Iran. Reliable statistics do not exist, and figures presented by various sources cannot be verified because of the circumstances prevailing in the country. Nor is it possible to establish whether the number of converts in Iran is increasing. However, in the opinion of Landinfo, the source material on which this report is based indicates a tendency towards growth in the volume of house churches during recent years. This can be caused by several factors, for example active missionary work by Evangelical organizations targeting Iran from abroad, strong dissatisfaction in the population with regard to living conditions and the oppressive policies of the authorities, and that conversion can be used as a strategy for emigration (UNHCR, meeting in Ankara March 2011; Sebnem Koser Akcapar 2006). This could indicate that some of the relatively recent converts are not members of registered Evangelical churches, but have joined house churches associated with Evangelical networks abroad.

When asked by Landinfo to estimate the number of converts in Iran, UNHCR (meeting in Ankara, March 2011) on the basis of its own case portfolio indicated that the number possibly could exceed a few thousand, but that no further estimates could be provided.

According to an article by the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA), there were assumed to be 200-300 Christian converts in Iran in 1979. In 1992, there were assumed to be 13,300 Iranian converts in total, whereof 6,700 were resident in Iran (AINA 2011). Identical figures are presented by Iranian Christian International (n.d.b).

The website of Elam Ministries (n.d.b) states that in 1979 there were less than 500 Christians who had a Muslim background, while currently there are more than 100,000. Reference is also made to some who claim that 20,000 converts exist, some say 100,000, while others lay claim to more than one million, but that nobody knows for certain. However, Elam Ministries claim to know that the home congregations are growing and that the networks are spreading throughout Iran. They claim that reports from reliable ministers, the demand for instructional material, the response to

satellite broadcasts and Internet sites and Iran's insatiable demand for the Holy Scripture testify to this fact (Elam, n.d.e).

In comparison, Christian Solidarity Worldwide estimated in 2009 that Christians from a Muslim background in Iran number 10,000 (CSW 2009, p. 5-6). In 2008 an article in the British newspaper *The Telegraph* also stated that Iran had 10,000 converts. Furthermore, according to Compass Direct (2008b), the large number of Iranian converts could be ascribed to the fact that radio and satellite TV channels have broadcast Christian programmes in Persian around the clock since 2003.

When Landinfo visited two of the three Evangelical churches in Tehran in November 2006, church leaders reported that the three churches in question had a total membership of between 680 and 730 individuals. A small number of congregations associated with the same churches were found in other Iranian cities, and in addition, approximately 150 converts were associated with an Anglican church in Shiraz (Landinfo 2006).⁴ However, members of house-church congregations were not included in these figures.

Eliz Sanasarian (2000, p. 44) has pointed out how most informants have estimated the number of non-ethnic Iranian Christians (a term for Protestant Christians) to a few thousand, but that the author also had heard mentioned from various sources numbers such as 15,000, 5,000, 8,000 and 10,000.

4.2 HOUSE CHURCHES

The term 'house congregation' or 'house church' refers to a private individual or minister who invites guests or followers home to participate in prayer, reading of the Gospels or studies. This means that the activity is not registered or approved by Iranian authorities, which is a requirement for being able to undertake religious activities in a legal manner.

According to an Iranian-born minister in Norway (telephone interview, February 2011), house churches are small, unofficial congregations with 10-15 members, who meet at each other's houses, hold private services or study the Bible. These groups to a varying extent undertake external evangelization. When new members are accepted, internal passwords are used to prevent infiltration by government intelligence, which is constantly perceived as a real risk.

The Norwegian embassy in Tehran has reported (e-mail March 2011) that house churches are a common denominator for informal gatherings that take place in Christian homes and where Christian issues are discussed, the Bible is read and in some cases prayers are said. The centre of the meetings can vary, from a minister to a Persian-language Christian satellite TV channel. The meetings are kept secret from the Iranian authorities, as opposed to the established Evangelical churches, in which the authorities monitor their membership and attendance. The house churches are largely separated from the established churches inside Iran, but appear to have close ties to Christian communities outside the country, especially as far as the Pentecostal groups are concerned. This is in spite of the fact that the liturgy used in many of the home churches appears to deviate considerably from that of the Pentecostal

⁴ The Immigration Appeals Board visited the church in question in the autumn of 2001. The visit was not pre-arranged. At that time, a church leader stated that the church had between 100 and 150 members.

movement, for example in congregations that only recognize Jesus as divine and reject the Holy Trinity.

According to a report published by the Danish immigration authorities in 2009, it does not appear as though the house churches constitute a network, but tend to act as independent churches (Danish Refugee Council & Danish Immigration Service 2009, p. 33).

Elam Ministries (n.d.c), however, claims on its website that the number of clandestine house congregations has increased strongly, but that the exact number of secret Christians remains unknown, even though at least ten networks are in operation. It is further reported that most of these house congregations grow because the Gospel is spread through extended families, and that there is evidence of secret followers all over Iran. The website describes how a house church is established in Iran, by speaking of Jesus to family and friends, by gathering new believers to weekly studies of the Bible and Christian community, and encouraging them to share their faith with friends and family members (Elam Ministries n.d.d).

5. ABOUT ISLAM AND APOSTASY

5.1 APOSTASY

In the Muslim context, conversion is associated with the issue of apostasy – renouncement of Islam. When seen in a historical and theoretical framework, traditional Islamic law divides the world into *dar-ar-islam*, the realm of Islam, and *dar-al-harb*, the realm which is at war against Muslims. Accordingly, a conversion is therefore first and foremost a renouncement of Islamic unity, and in Muslim history this has been compared to treason, political rebellion or opposition. This mindset also explains why Christian missionary activity towards Muslims is either prohibited or subject to strong restrictions in most Muslim countries.

5.2 LEGAL SOURCES

In terms of law, apostasy⁵ is assessed in relation to Islamic law, *sharia*.⁶ The Koran and the *sunna*⁷ of the Prophet Mohammed are the prime authoritative sources of Islamic law. The *sunna* are the collected records of Mohammed, his nearest family and his first followers, as recorded in the *hadith* literature (the tradition, also called ‘the records’). The Jafari school (the prevailing legal school in Iran) also includes hadiths ascribed to the twelve imams of Shia Islam.

In a Muslim context, apostasy is not only associated with conversion. It also includes blasphemy, for example offending the Prophet Mohammed and Muslim faith and practices.

⁵ Greek: Rebellion

⁶ Arabic: What is prescribed, the sum of Allah’s prescriptions and proscriptions.

⁷ Arabic: way of life, behaviour, custom.

5.3 ISLAMIC LAW AND APOSTASY

The Koran and the hadiths are not unequivocal and clear on the issue of punishment for apostasy. Nor is there a universal interpretation of Islamic law. The Shia and Sunni Muslim legal schools therefore use varying interpretations of a number of religious and legal questions. However, there is agreement among Muslim clergy and in *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, that apostasy is a serious offence that merits punishment. Traditionally, apostasy was seen as a rebellion against Allah and a threat to the Muslim community, the *umma*.⁸ Muslim clergy disagree as to whether an apostate should be sentenced to death, and if so, who should deliver the punishment (Hardy 2008). However, the prevailing view is that an apostate deserves death, and that Muslim communities can or shall punish him or her (Abdelhadi 2006; Davis 2006).

With regard to apostasy, Shia jurisprudence is not significantly different from its Sunni counterpart.

5.4 CONSEQUENCES OF APOSTASY

In Muslim countries, apostasy can entail consequences in civil law (loss of property or inheritance rights, dissolution of marriage) or criminal law. The precondition for reactions is that the conversion is known and has been reported to the authorities of the country in question. The extent to which apostasy will entail consequences in terms of civil or criminal law varies from one Muslim country to another. In practice, a convert will primarily face problems if his or her family is aware of the conversion, does not accept it and puts pressure on the convert to convince him or her to return to Islam, or reports the conversion to the police.

6. IRANIAN LAW AND APOSTASY

6.1 LEGISLATION

Apostasy is not regulated by the prevailing criminal code, but is assessed in relation to traditional Islamic law and legal interpretations by religious authorities (CSW 2009, p. 4).

The criminal code of Iran has been under revision for many years. The draft proposition included a new provision that explicitly proscribes renouncement of Islam. The proposal was approved by the Parliament in 2008. However, it was not approved by the Guardian Council,⁹ which would be required for a new criminal code to enter into force. Instead, the proposal was returned to the Parliament with requests for amendments. The processing of the amendments is still underway, and in December 2010 the Parliament decided to extend the prevailing legislation until March 2012 (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty 2011).

⁸ The *umma* comprises all Muslims, all over the world.

⁹ The Guardian Council consists of six clergymen and six lawyers who monitor that all legislation is in conformity with Islamic law.

6.2 STANDARD OF PROOF

The standard of proof for conversion and thereby apostasy amounts to four confessions at four different occasions in front of a Muslim judge. The accused must also be an adult in the religious sense (which in Iran is 15 years for boys and 9 years for girls), be of sound mind and have acted with due intention, i.e. not under intoxication, duress or pressure.

The court of law must have specific evidence of conversion in order to sentence the accused. If a person accused of apostasy testifies to being a Muslim in a court of law, it is unlikely that he or she will risk further prosecution. The precondition, however, is that he or she is not indicted for other offences. Often, the convert will be exposed to active pressure to repent and return to Islam during the proceedings.

A confession is accepted as evidence. However, since the Iranian criminal justice system is based on Islamic principles, a confession is only legally valid if it is submitted in court in front of a Muslim judge. The procedural requirements include four confessions (or admissions/confirmations) on four separate occasions in front of the judge.

The punishment for conversion for a Muslim man, if all criteria have been met, is a death sentence. If all criteria have been met there are no other alternatives, meaning that the judge cannot substitute the death penalty with a prison sentence for a male convert.¹⁰

A female convert will be sentenced to life imprisonment. If she repents and declares herself a Muslim again, she may be released. The precondition for a release, however, is that she has not been sentenced (or indicted) for other offences.

6.3 WHICH COURT OF LAW WILL DECIDE IN CASES OF APOSTASY?

In Iran, proceedings against an apostate can be made in front of a revolutionary tribunal or a regular civilian court. This depends on whether the person in question is accused of other offences in addition to apostasy, and the nature of these offences.¹¹

In case of a conviction, the Supreme Court will assess the sentence, as well as make a ruling on whether the case has been processed by an appropriate court of law.

If an Iranian citizen is reported to the police for apostasy, he or she can count on being brought in for questioning and investigation. If the person confirms the accusation, he or she risks arrest and detention. Someone accused of apostasy will not be released on bail awaiting trial. The legal authorities will not grant bail to detainees who risk the death penalty.¹²

During the court proceedings, the accused will be brought in front of the judge four times at weekly or monthly intervals. During the process the judge will often put

¹⁰ This punishment is also practised in Sunni Islam. Sunni Muslims account for between 85 and 90 per cent of all Muslims.

¹¹ An Iranian Muslim clergyman accused of deviant theology or blasphemy will normally face charges in a special court for clergy.

¹² Iranian legislation imposes the death penalty for a number of crimes, including homicide, rape, infidelity, homosexual intercourse, serious drug-related crimes, espionage, apostasy and insults of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic.

pressure on the accused, and inform him or her that they can save their life by declaring themselves to be Muslims, and also recommend guidance and serious contemplation of the matter. The family can also be asked to persuade or put pressure on the accused. If he or she during the fourth and final court session persists in the conversion and maintains that it has been made with due intention and voluntarily, the judge must impose the death penalty for a man and life imprisonment for a woman (Iranian lawyer, interview in Tehran, January 2009).

7. CHRISTIANS AND CONVERTS – IN PERSPECTIVE

7.1 IN GENERAL

According to Iranian religious tradition, there is a difference between offences that are committed in a public space and things that take place in the shelter of privacy. Issues that are at odds with Islam and take place in public must be punished, while things that take place in the private sphere, and thereby are concealed, will to a larger extent be tolerated. This could include drinking alcohol, illicit sexual affairs, illegal films, books and music as well as religious practices. A large number of Iranians, irrespective of their ethnic background and religious affiliation, in practice lead two lives: one in the public space and another in the private. As long as the private matters remain private and Islamic rules and values are not challenged or violated in a visible manner, Iranian authorities will normally not interfere in the private sphere of the citizens.

In general, all Iranian non-Muslim minorities keep a low profile in the public space with regard to their religious affiliations. Simply put, one could say that they know their place as *dhimmi* (a legal term in the *sharia*, denoting non-Muslims living in a society governed according to Islamic law). As long as the Islamic framework is obeyed, minorities can practise their religion and operate within their organizations free from any scrutiny and interference by the authorities. However, this does not apply to the Baha'i, who are declared illegal and whose members are treated in violation of international law and human rights. Nor does it apply to the house churches, since the Iranian authorities have not endorsed their activities.

Traditionally, problems with the authorities have occurred with regard to external and evangelical activity targeting Muslims. Any Christian (Christian-born or convert) who actively engages in missionary work, for example, by distributing Christian literature, risks problems in the workplace and the local community. In addition to the reaction from the authorities, evangelization will most likely be regarded as offensive and socio-culturally unacceptable by most Iranians. Furthermore, if the matter is reported to the police, the person risks surveillance, serious charges and prosecution.

According to Kari Vogt (1997, p. 79), charismatic Christians who preached openly in Persian constitute the group that faced most problems (in addition to the Baha'i) during the 1990s. This included Anglican Christians, who have been met with suspicion and have been under pressure during the entire history of the Islamic Republic, since many of their members are converts from a Muslim background,

because of its ties to the Church of England and because they were suspected of being fifth columnists for Great Britain (Simpson & Shubart 1995, p. 234).

Balancing the desire for evangelization against the requirements of the authorities is a difficult task for the leaders of the Evangelical churches. There can be no doubt that they periodically have faced significant problems, since evangelization is not allowed and that changing of religion is only permitted if the individual converts to Islam. This has given rise to conflicts with other churches that discourage or dislike evangelization and fear that this may entail consequences for other Christians. Occasionally, Iranian authorities have put strong and persistent pressure on the leadership of the churches to induce them to close the church door to Muslims, not establish house churches and stop all evangelization that targets Muslims. One example was evident in 1993, when the leadership of the churches was pressured into signing declarations saying that Muslims were barred from participating in church service. Subsequently, the Revolutionary Guard on numerous occasions positioned itself inside as well as outside the churches. Each time, a number of members were arrested and detained for several hours before being released. According to Simpson & Shubart (1995, p. 234), this was intended as a reminder of what it means to be a religious minority in The Islamic Republic of Iran.

Norwegian immigration authorities have been in (intermittent) contact with Evangelical church leaders since the 1990s. According to the church leaders, the pressure exerted on them has increased, abated, and then increased again over time. In their experience, the Evangelical churches were at the focus of the authorities' surveillance, and that the line was drawn at overt evangelization and – in some cases – ordination of ministers. There were examples of converts who had lived without problems for many years, but suddenly faced trouble after having been ordained ministers. During the 1990s, several cases of this kind were solved with the aid of a discreet agreement between the involved churches and some Western embassies that granted a visa. Iranian authorities did not raise any obstacles and let the persons concerned leave Iran legally with their families. Church leaders also reported that ordinary members only in exceptional cases have faced problems in finding a job, being enrolled in the University or obtaining a passport.

Experience has shown that the authorities repeatedly have used Islamic law as a threat. Recalcitrant church leaders have been confronted with the fact that the authorities can prosecute them if they so wish. The authorities have also threatened church leaders with the assertion that the police will be unable to protect them against “extreme Islamic groups”, unless they obey the authorities' requirements. Short-term arrests of church leaders, threats during questioning, raids, confiscation of internal documents and warnings have occurred on numerous occasions. In 2004, Iranian authorities conducted a major operation against church leaders in Tehran, during which 80 arrests were made. Most of those arrested were released shortly after, but the intention of the operation had been fulfilled. In the subsequent period most of the churches in Tehran have kept a lower profile and acted more in line with the authorities' requirements. On several occasions, church leaders have stated that the authorities monitor all their activities and know the identity of all members, including others with a less firm affiliation to the churches.

In practice, people are convicted of apostasy only very rarely. The most recent conviction is reported to have occurred in 1990, when a minister was executed

because of apostasy, evangelization and espionage in favour of the US (Telegraph 2008). The minister had lived as a convert since 1960. In 1994, however, three ministers (whereof two were converts) were abducted and killed by persons unknown (Landinfo 2006). The assassinations attracted international attention and had a profound impact on the Evangelical Christians of Iran, causing the afflicted churches to keep a low profile for an extended period of time.

In 2004, a minister who had converted to Christianity in 1980 was arrested in the context of a Christian conference. This minister, who was an army colonel, was prosecuted, but acquitted of apostasy (Norsk Misjon i Øst 2005). However, he was convicted of violation of the military criminal code, because he had kept his Christian faith secret from his superiors. According to the law, only Muslims can be officers in the armed forces. The man was sentenced to three years' imprisonment and had his pension rights revoked. In 2005, another minister was stabbed on the street by persons unknown. The minister died from the injuries.

Another issue that has caused conflicts with the Iranian authorities is the contact that the evangelizing churches maintain with Western embassies and Christian communities abroad (the contact with the embassies has varied over time, in line with the prevailing political climate and level of threat imposed by the authorities). This contact with foreign co-religionists may make the churches especially vulnerable, since it may entail allegations of illegal donations. Financial support from abroad is allowed only on the basis of preceding approval by the authorities. During the 1990s as well as later, the churches have periodically kept a very low profile, and have not wished to have any particular focus on their situation from the West. The contact with the embassies has taken place on the churches' premises. In practice, this means that the churches themselves have regulated their contact with embassies and other foreigners.

7.2 THE 2005 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION – DETERIORATION OF THE HUMAN-RIGHTS SITUATION

Following the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in 2005, the political climate and the general situation with regard to human rights have deteriorated dramatically. The situation became even further aggravated following the contentious presidential election in June 2009. A large number of human-rights activists (lawyers, female activists and journalists), cultural workers, students, intellectuals, trade union leaders, ethnic-minority activists, the organized political opposition and demonstrators have been exposed to surveillance, threats, harassment, arrest, torture, politically tinged prosecution and very harsh sentences. Religious minorities have also fallen victim to the generally deteriorating political climate. This has especially been felt by the Baha'i, evangelical Christians and Jews (U.S. Department of State 2010).

In April 2009, prior to the UN Conference on Racism (Durban II) in Geneva, several human-rights organizations voiced strong criticism against President Ahmadinejad and his regime. The organizations pointed out that discrimination on a religious basis is widespread in Iran, and that the Baha'i, Christians, Jews, Sufis (Islamic mystics), Sunni Muslims and other minorities are exposed to arbitrary arrests, threats and harassment (Iran Focus 2009).

Arrests of Evangelical Christians have also taken place in Shiraz, Mashad and Amol (Compass Direct News 2008b). In 2006, a married couple who headed a house church in Mashad (he was a convert, while she was the daughter of one of the ministers who was killed in 1994) was arrested and detained for several weeks before being released on bail (Amnesty International 2006).

In 2008, a man (the son of the minister who was executed in 1990) was arrested in Mashad and detained in custody for approximately two months, on charges of propaganda against the regime (Compass Direct News 2008a).

Two men who were arrested in Shiraz in 2008 were released after approximately four months in custody (Christian Today 2008). The case against them was dropped after their lawyer in court testified that they were both born Muslims and that they had not renounced Islam, and the accused had declared themselves as Muslims in front of the judge (Western Embassy in Iran, interview in Tehran, January 2009).

In January 2009, three persons from two families, all of whom were associated with house churches, were arrested in Tehran (Compass Direct News 2009a). One was released after one week with no charges. The remaining two, a married couple, were released on bail after two weeks in custody (Compass Direct News 2009b).

In March 2009, three Christians from Shiraz were given suspended sentences of eight months' imprisonment with five years' parole for having spread the Gospel and for having collaborated with "anti-government movements". When passing the sentence, the judge warned that the suspended sentences would be reversed and the persons involved would be arrested and charged with apostasy if evidence was found of them spreading the Gospel again (Christian Today 2009). These three Christians were converts (Compass Direct News 2009c).

Two Christian women were also arrested in March and placed in the Evin prison in Tehran, accused of having acted against the security of the state and for participation in illegal assemblies. These two are reported to have been involved in church activities and distribution of Bibles (Compass Direct News 2009d). Both women were released in 2010, the charges against them were dropped, and they were allowed to leave Iran.

8. GRADUAL DETERIORATION SINCE 2009

According to the Norwegian embassy in Tehran (e-mail, March 2011), a gradual deterioration of the situation for non-Muslim minorities has been observed since the presidential election in June 2009. Until 2010, the regime used their resources on the demonstrations and the arrests and trials that followed the election. The general human-rights situation has deteriorated further, and there are renewed reports of strong surveillance and control of evangelical communities.

In its annual report for 2010, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) writes that during 2009/2010 there has been a significant increase in the number of raids during church services, harassment and threats of congregation members, surveillance and imprisonments, which have

caused many Christians to flee the country. USCIRF claims that in terms of human rights and religious freedom, the situation in Iran has deteriorated to the same level as immediately after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (USCIRF 2010).

From 2008 to 2010, the Evangelical network Elam Ministries registered a considerable increase in the number of arrests (Elam 2011b).

In its annual report, published in May 2010, Amnesty International wrote that members of religious minorities risk discrimination, harassment, arbitrary arrest and damage to property, and that those who renounce Islam risks charges of apostasy, which may lead to capital punishment (Amnesty International 2010a).

The situation was aggravated in the autumn of 2010, when several Iranian leaders made derogatory statements about the country's Christian citizens. The supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared that the enemies of Iran wish to destroy the country's social and religious values through the spread of Baha'i and the Christian house churches. The governor of Tehran, Morteza Tamadon, accused Evangelical Christians of promoting a "cultural invasion" and warned that the "final blow against the Christians" was imminent (Compass Direct News 2011). For his part, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called for "a halt to the growth of Christianity in Iran" (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom - USCIRF 2010). To Christian Iranians, these verbal attacks were perceived as a go-ahead to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard to take action against Christians (Compass Direct News 2011).

9. ESPECIALLY EXPOSED GROUPS

Leaders and members of congregations who engage in external activities, as well as members of house churches, are especially exposed in Iran. Most of the Christians and converts who have been arrested during the last year have been associated with house churches (Norwegian Embassy, e-mail March 2011).

According to an Iranian-born minister in Norway (telephone interview, February 2011), Evangelical churches are required to submit their membership records to the authorities, which makes it easy for the authorities to monitor the communities.

In its report on religious freedom for July 2009/June 2010, the U.S. Department of State noted that members of the Evangelical churches in particular were exposed to harassment and surveillance. During this period, the authorities enforced the ban on missionary activity through surveillance of Evangelical Christians and by barring Muslims from entering churches, closing churches and arresting Christian converts. Members of Evangelical congregations were required to carry membership cards, and were subject to ID checks by officers at the entrance to the church area. Religious services could only be held on Sundays, and the church leaders were ordered to inform the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance before new members could be included in the congregation (U.S. Department of State 2010).

9.1 ARRESTS, IMPRISONMENTS AND ABUSE

Christian leaders who had undertaken externally oriented activities for the Armenian and Assyrian Evangelical churches were also arrested in 2010. Those detained in February 2010 included, for example, the Assyrian minister Wilson Issawi and the Armenian minister Vahik Abrahamian. Issawi was the minister of an Assyrian Pentecostal congregation, the Assyrian Evangelical Church in Kermanshah, which was closed by the authorities (USCIRF 2010).

The Evangelical network Elam Ministries registered at least 202 arrests of Christians during the period from June 2010 to January 2011 (Elam 2011b). At least 33 were still imprisoned in January 2011. This figure is also confirmed by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW 2011c). By comparison, Elam Ministries registered 80 arrests over a one-year period in 2008/2009 (Elam 2011b).

The Norwegian embassy registered 125 arrests of Christians during 2010, which is nearly a doubling from the 65 arrests registered in 2009. The main reason for this strong increase was the mass arrests during Christmas 2010, when approximately 60 Christians were detained. Most of the detainees belonged to Evangelical congregations, primarily house churches, and were converts (Norwegian Embassy, e-mail March 2011).

During the Christmas holidays in 2010, the Iranian police undertook the largest mass arrest in the Evangelical community for many years. Between 60 and 70 members of the Pentecostal congregation Assembly of God and house churches in Tehran and Esfahan were imprisoned. All the detainees were Evangelical Christians, including ministers and leaders from the network of Iranian house churches (CSW 2011a, 2011b; Elam 2011a, 2011b, 2011c). Those arrested were imprisoned, denied contact with their families, exposed to questioning and threats, and had their homes searched and personal property confiscated. Several of them were separated from their children for a period. Most of them appear to have been subsequently released, but according to Elam (2011c), at least 26 Christians were still in prison at the end of January 2011.

In 2009, in its report on religious freedom in Iran, Christian Solidarity Worldwide wrote that physical abuse and torture during detention rarely was reported. However, the report referred to a married couple (converts) who were exposed to physical abuse during four days spent in custody. In addition they were questioned and threatened, and before being released they were forced to sign a declaration stating that they would refrain from Christian activity (CSW 2009, p. 6).

Eyewitness accounts from 2010 and 2011 indicate that a considerable deterioration has taken place. For example, on 27 December 2010, the Iranian Christian news agency Mohabat News brought reports of brutal treatment of detainees. A 23-year-old male convert, who was an active member of a house church in the city of Karaj, recounted how he was questioned, had his hands tied behind his back and was suspended from a hook, where he was beaten with wires and water hoses during repeated questioning about his relationship to the house church (Mohabat News 2010). A minister in a Pentecostal congregation in Kermanshah is reported to have suffered abuse during a spell in prison. His spouse, who visited him in the prison, observed marks on his face that she claimed must have been caused by torture (International Committee of Jurists 2010).

The duration of the imprisonments varies considerably, from a few days to weeks or months, and in some cases, several years. According to USCIRF (2010) it is common that in cases of offences related to religious faith, Iranian authorities release the prisoners but uphold the charges against them, and thereby use future imprisonment as a permanent threat. In some cases the prisoners will be released on bail (U.S. Department of State 2010).

The Norwegian embassy (e-mail, March 2011) also reports that the registered detentions predominantly are of short duration. In some rare cases, the imprisonment has lasted for several months. Release is often granted against a very substantial bail, while no formal charges are raised and no prosecution is initiated. The bail sum is set to a level where the family of the detainee must use their home as collateral. This is a very common procedure in the Iranian criminal justice system, intended to commit persons regarded as oppositional to strong self-censorship.

The embassy also writes that the house churches are virtually the only communities in Iran undertaking widespread evangelization. The authorities fear that these may serve as potentially fertile ground for oppositional activities that may pose a threat to the regime. Secondly, in many cases there appear to be links between house churches and foreign groups, including in the form of financial and spiritual support. Furthermore, these communities proclaim and spread Western values. Iranian authorities perceive this kind of connection to the West as highly suspicious and as a threat to the Islamic regime.

9.2 CLOSURE OF CHURCHES

Several Pentecostal congregations have had their churches closed by the authorities. For example, the church belonging to an Assyrian Pentecostal congregation in Kermanshah was closed and sealed by security forces in January 2010. Two other Assyrian Pentecostal congregations, in Tehran and Urmiya in North-Western Iran respectively, were closed in 2009 (FIDH 2010, p. 26).

9.3 CHARGES OF APOSTASY

Charging converts of apostasy appears to have become more common. For example, a lawyer defending a group of Pentecostals arrested in Rasht in October 2009 and in Tehran in June 2010 stated that the number of recently converted Christians who were charged with apostasy was rising, and that he defended ten of them (FIDH 2010, p. 26).

Formal charges of apostasy against converts have occurred relatively seldom in Iran, but threats of such charges have been brought up during the trial as a means of pressuring converts to declare that they repent and wish to return to Islam. In many cases the court has decided to release the convert without any charges, or brought other charges, such as participation in illegal house churches or for having had contact with foreign media. Other charges may include “acts against the security of the state”, “insults of Islam” and “propaganda against the system” (FIDH 2010, p. 26). In some cases, the courts have carried out their threats of imposing death sentences for renouncing Islam. In September 2010, a court of appeal in the Gilan province sustained the death sentence passed on a minister in the Church of Iran for apostasy (Sterling 2010).

According to Amnesty International (2010b, p. 20), the arrest of the minister the previous year may have been connected with his protest against the mandatory instruction in Islam in schools. The verdict was appealed by his defence attorney in December 2010. The International Campaign for Human Rights also appealed to the Iranian Supreme Court to reverse the death sentence (Black 2010). In July 2011, the Norwegian embassy (e-mail, July 2011) reported that the Supreme Court had annulled the verdict and returned the case to a lower court for renewed processing.

The Norwegian embassy in Tehran has also reported that charges brought against Christians tend to be based on the more vague provisions in the criminal code, such as propaganda against the regime or actions that are contrary to the security of the state (e-mail, March 2011). There are occasional reports of Christians being charged with apostasy, but these charges are only very rarely brought to trial or any verdicts passed. During 2010 and the first months of 2011, the embassy registered nine verdicts against Christians. In eight of these cases the sentence was set to imprisonment for one year. The ninth cases involved the minister in the Church of Iran.

Christian Today (2011b; 2011c) reported that 11 Christians who had been charged with actions contrary to the security of the state, use of alcohol and participation in a house church were acquitted by the Revolutionary Tribunal in Bandar-Anzali on 1 May. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) welcomed the acquittal, but remained concerned about the six members of the Church of Iran in Shiraz who were still waiting for their cases to be decided. These six are charged with blasphemy, but the case has been postponed to give the prosecution more time to consult with the traditional churches with regard to the question of guilt (Christian Today 2011a).

9.4 CONFISCATION OF PASSPORTS

According to an Iranian minister in Norway (interview February 2011), passports are often confiscated when the police undertake searches of homes and raids against house churches. The CSW (2009, p. 6) also reported that in 2008, at least 40 incidents were registered in which Christians – chiefly converts – had their passports confiscated upon return to Iran after having attended Christian conferences abroad. The converts were summoned to court, where they were exposed to pressure to return to Islam if they wanted to have their travel documents returned to them and avoid prosecution. A considerable number of the converts had yielded to this pressure (CSW 2009, p. 6).

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