

Report

**Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1) – prevalence and conditions for religious practise**



**LANDINFO**

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## **SUMMARY**

Christian converts who want to exercise their faith in fellowship with others, have to meet in the privacy of their own homes for worship services – in so-called “house churches”. House churches are usually small in terms of membership, and can be linked to networks abroad or local/national networks. Iranian authorities have declared that the operation of these house churches is illegal.

Several sources indicate that the Christian underground movement has been growing in recent years. Frustration with a repressive and religiously rooted regime and a critical and negative view of Islam, are some of the reasons given as to why Muslim Iranians choose to convert to Christianity. At the same time, the movement is growing as a result of a targeted missionary activity by Christian organizations abroad.

Iranian authorities view the organized house church movement as a political opposition that threatens national security. Consequently, Christian converts have been increasingly exposed to arrests and charges of security-related crimes since 2005, and especially after 2009-2010.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared based on questions and topics raised by the immigration authorities to Landinfo in recent years. The reason is that a large number of Iranians who have applied for protection in Norway have claimed fear of persecution due to conversion from Islam to Christianity.

It is forbidden for Muslims in the Islamic Republic of Iran to convert to other religions, and Christian converts in Iran today do not have access to the registered churches that exist in the country. Thus, in recent years illegal “home churches” and networks of such churches have been established, where small groups of converts meet in private homes.

The report describes the growth of these house church communities, how they are organised and how new members are recruited. The report also discusses some of the reasons why Iranian Muslims convert to Christianity and various forms of missionary activities that make this possible. Chapter 4 focuses on the limitations of freedom of belief in Iran and the authorities’ perception of the activities that occur in the house churches. The chapter also provides a brief summary of government reactions and presents views on which converts are most vulnerable to arrest and prosecution. Finally, the report briefly addresses reactions from family and local community, certain civil matters and the dilemma many converts face: whether they should stay in Iran or leave the country.

The report is part 1 of a two-part publication about Christian converts and house churches in Iran. Part 2, published simultaneously with this report, provides a thorough review of topics related to arrests and prosecution of converts. Here, specific cases where converts have been prosecuted in Iran in recent years are presented. See Landinfo 2017, *Iran: Christian converts and house churches (2) - arrests and prosecutions* (Iran: Kristne konvertitter og hjemmekirker (2) - arrestasjoner og straffeforfølgelse).

## 1.1 SOURCES

The contents of this report are partly based on information obtained during Landinfo’s fact-finding missions to Turkey and England in autumn 2016. Landinfo had conversations with sources of various backgrounds, including Iranian pastors and Iranian converts, an Iranian journalist living in the U.K., as well as representatives of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Each source is listed in the reference list.

Access to primary sources regarding converts is limited in today’s Iran. Landinfo therefore chose to travel to Turkey and England – where several Christian organisations operate in Iranian exile environments – to obtain relevant information. The selection of sources has been guided by Landinfo’s wish to speak with people who have been, or are, directly affected by the problems discussed in the report.

We emphasise that many of the Iranian Christian sources in exile (individuals and organisations) are actors who conduct active missionary work directed at the population of Iran, and that the information they provide is not always necessarily objective or fact-based. At the same time, many of them, due to personal experience, possess important first-hand information on the situation for Iranian converts, and can help form a good picture of the situation.

The information obtained from oral sources is supplemented by publicly available information obtained from human rights organisations, UN agencies, other immigration authorities, news articles and other literature.

A general weakness of the source material is the lack of independent sources. Iranian authorities limit the opportunities of foreign media and other observers to obtain information freely in the country. Even when observers are allowed to visit Iran, they must limit their contact with local sources so as not to expose them to reprisals from the government.

Many news articles and human rights reports therefore seem to be largely based on many of the same sources in the Iranian convert communities outside Iran. This means that it is difficult to verify information and statements from involved actors by consulting other sources. Information that seems to be confirmed by several sources may prove to originate from a single primary source (see also the introductory comments on sources in part 2 of the report, on arrests and prosecution).

Several of the oral sources on which the report is based are either kept anonymous or information about their personal circumstances and background is omitted. This is done based on the sources' own requests and to protect their safety and livelihood.

## **2. CHRISTIAN CONVERTS IN IRAN**

### **2.1 BACKGROUND**

Christianity has a long history and deep roots in Iran. Its presence on Iranian soil dates back to the third century A.D., possibly even earlier (Miller 2015, p. 67). The many old church buildings that are still in use, are concrete examples of Christian presence on Iranian soil (Vartanian 2015). According to Iran's constitution, these traditional Christian groups may practice their faith and organise family law matters within their church community (Constitution 1979, § 13).

However, this does not apply to people who have converted from Islam to Christianity (or another religion). Apostasy from Islam is forbidden and punishable in Iran. Previously, and under certain conditions, the government has nevertheless tolerated the existence of Protestant church communities where many members were converts of Muslim background (hereafter referred to as convert churches). However, between

2009 and 2013 almost all of these churches were closed by the authorities (Elam Ministries, email September 2017; CHRI 2013; Kremida 2012). This means that Christian converts today must practise their faith in private homes and via the Internet and social media, which the government can react against as illegally organised activity.

Traditionally, Iranian Christians have belonged to ethnic minorities such as Armenians and Assyrians. These thus belong to old church communities based on common ethnicity and language, such as the Apostolic Church of Armenia and the Assyrian Church of the East. In a number of reports from recent years about Christians in Iran, these minorities are often referred to as “ethnic Christians”. Protestants, mostly ethnic Persians of Shiite Muslim background, are referred to as “non-ethnic Christians” and “Evangelical Christians” (Miller 2015; Finnish Immigration Service 2015, p. 2-3; ICHRI 2013a, p. 17-21).

The convert churches in today’s Iran are a result of missionary activities that took place during the Pahlavi regime (1925-1979), but Christian missionary activities on Iranian soil also occurred to some extent prior to this (Miller 2015, p. 67-68; World Council of Churches, unknown year).

Most converts in Iran are Protestants, more specifically Pentecostals, Presbyterians and Anglicans. Reports of conversions to other branches of Christianity are rare (CHRI 2017; Walton 2017). Converts have different ethnic backgrounds and thus reflect the multi-ethnic and multicultural Iranian population.

As Landinfo sees it, converts on Iranian soil can be roughly divided into two main groups, depending on when they converted. The first group includes those who converted as a result of Western missionary activities before the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, their descendants and a relatively small number of new converts until around 2005-2006. These converts have been affiliated with registered convert churches whose congregations consisted mostly of people with Persian and Muslim backgrounds, but also people with Assyrian, Armenian, Kurdish or other ethnic backgrounds. The largest and most renowned are the Assembly of God churches, which were Pentecostal branches affiliated with the American Pentecostal Movement. In addition, there were Presbyterian and Anglican churches who also did missionary work and baptised Muslims. Under certain conditions, these churches were allowed to continue operations after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and until around 2013 (DIS, DRC & Landinfo 2013, p. 10-11).

In 1979, there were allegedly around 500 converts of Muslim background in Iran (Elam Ministries, unknown year; Miller 2015, p. 71). Although the figures are uncertain, this oldest group of converts is relatively small, and accounts for a fraction of the converts in today’s Iran.

The second and largest group of converts are those who have converted after 2005-2006, as a result of Christian missionary activities aimed at the population of Iran from abroad (see chapter 2.5 on the number of converts). This missionary work is done via satellite TV, by using the Internet and social media, as well as by spreading Bibles in

Persian. Several sources also state that missionary activities towards Muslims occur within the country, despite the government's repressive measures. Some of those who preach the Christian gospel in Iran have received training and been baptised abroad (Chiaromonte 2016; pastor and member of the Church of Iran, meeting in London, November 2016; Lane 2014).

The absolute majority of these newer converts have probably not had any contact with the registered convert churches, but belong to the house church movement. This movement has evolved into an underground movement. According to Mansour Borji, Iranian-born pastor and leader of Article 18, a Christian human rights organisation that works for religious freedom in Iran (meeting in Uxbridge, November 2016), house churches have emerged independently of the convert churches. This applies to both individual house churches and those which are part of a network. Borji told Landinfo that Muslims all over Iran convert and form house churches and networks after having followed Christian programmes on satellite TV and by using social media and other information technology.

At the same time, several sources have pointed out to Landinfo that the house church movement initially developed and grew as a consequence of the restrictions imposed by the government on the convert churches in order to prevent their expansion and growth. Both an Iranian pastor affiliated with a Christian organisation in Istanbul (meeting in September 2016) and Mansour Borji (meeting in November 2016) pointed out that the increased political pressure directed at the convert churches and their leadership after 2005 contributed to church members starting to practise religious activities in private homes. Thus, there was no absolute distinction between these two groups of converts. As the convert churches were closed, the converts who were formally or informally affiliated with these churches were referred to practise their faith privately (World Watch Monitor 2016; Kremida 2012; Bradley 2014).

Like other communities that are perceived to be critical of or a threat to the regime, the situation for converts of Muslim background worsened after the controversial presidential election in June 2009. From Christmas 2009, the government has directed increased attention to the house church movement. Parallel with the worsening of the general human rights situation in the country, there has been a sharp increase in the number of arrests and prosecutions against people associated with the movement (Bradley 2014, p. 186; Landinfo 2017).

Given these circumstances, converts in today's Iran, in close cooperation with Christian organisations abroad, have developed a number of tools and forums that allow them to obtain religious literature, receive training and have contact with other members of religious communities via open and closed group communities on the Internet. Satellite TV, online churches, applications and social media such as Facebook and YouTube are used for preaching and worship services, exchanging ideas, expressing their faith, and conducting missionary work aimed at Muslim Iranians (Open Doors USA 2017a; Iranian pastor affiliated with a Christian organisation,

meeting in Istanbul, September 2016; Ellis 2016a; Mansour Borji, meeting in November 2016).

## **2.2 CONVERT CHURCHES**

Iran's convert churches, whose congregations primarily consisted of converts of Muslim background, have experienced greater pressure, more visible control, more harassment and more restrictions than other Christian church communities in Iran. This is primarily due to three important factors.

The first is that convert churches hold religious services in Persian and also use Persian-language Bibles and other Christian literature (ICHRI 2013a, p. 20). This is in contrast to the Armenian and Assyrian churches, which are ethnically-based, and which use Armenian and Aramaic as liturgical languages. Use of Persian is perceived as more threatening by the government because the message thus has a potential to reach out to the Muslim population in the country (see, for example, Kremida 2012).

Secondly, the convert churches have for many years had a proactive attitude towards Christian missionary activities directed at their Muslim countrymen. While the ethnically-based church communities (and several other church communities among Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox Christians) have loyally followed the ban on Christian missionary activities, the Assembly of God churches, in particular, have maintained that the Christian faith should not be kept hidden, but on the contrary should be practised and preached openly. Therefore, churches have for periods of time, and particularly in the 1990s, conducted active missionary work aimed at Muslims, despite all warnings and threats from the government (ICHRI 2013a, p. 20).

A third reason is that the convert churches, historically and theologically, have been affiliated with congregations and Christian organisations in Western countries (ICHRI 2013a, p. 20).

After the Revolution in 1979, the government allowed the convert churches to stay open and preach in Persian, but simultaneously introduced restrictions on activities to prevent the growth and propagation of the churches (ICHRI 2013a, p. 20). According to Small Media (2014, p. 54), immediately after the Revolution religious leaders were asked to sign an agreement not to conduct missionary work aimed at Muslims. Pastor Haik Hovsepian Mehr, leader of the Assembly of God, was the only church leader who refused to sign such an agreement.<sup>1</sup>

The congregations in these churches were small. For example, when Landinfo visited the main church of the Assembly of God in Tehran in 2006, the pastor at the time said that his congregation consisted of around 500 people. In addition, five small church communities outside Tehran were also affiliated with the Assembly of God. On the same occasion, Landinfo also visited the Emmanuel Protestant Church in Tehran. The

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<sup>1</sup> Pastor Haik Hovsepian was abducted in January 1994 and later found dead. The murder was never solved. Duane A. Miller mentions Hovsepian in the research article *Power, Personalities and Politics* (2015, p. 73-74, 81 and 83).

pastor said that his congregation had between 120 and 150 members, while St. Peter's Evangelical Church, also in Tehran, had between 60 and 80 members (meetings in Tehran, November 2006).<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, the pressure on the Assembly of God, Presbyterian and Anglican churches gradually increased. In 2012, several churches were closed. The main church of the Assembly of God in Tehran was closed in 2013, and the pastor was imprisoned (Small Media 2014, p. 56; CHRI 2013a; DIS, DRC & Landinfo 2013, p. 10-11).<sup>3</sup> The churches have since been closed.

It is difficult to clarify whether there are still open convert churches in Iran. However, the Iranian Christian organisation Elam Ministries told Landinfo in an email (September 2017) that according to their knowledge, there are three Anglican churches open in Iran today: one in Tehran, one in Shiraz and one in Isfahan. Elam also writes that these churches are carefully monitored by the authorities. For example, Elam states that the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) is present at the church services in Shiraz and observes who participates. Consequently, most people with Muslim backgrounds do not attend the worship services, which, allegedly, the church leaders also have warned them against. According to Elam, it is likely that these churches are kept open partially so that the authorities can claim that there is religious freedom in Iran. However, in reality there are no churches where converts of Muslim background can participate freely and without fear of reactions (Elam Ministries, email September 2017).

## 2.3 HOUSE CHURCHES

After most of the convert churches were closed, converts today are referred to practise their religion alone, using the Internet and social media and/or in small communities in private homes – in so-called house churches.

Organised Christian practice in house churches is certainly not a new phenomenon in Iran. The author Mark Bradley (2014, p. 166), who describes the conditions for “Iran's new Christians” in depth, has interviewed leaders in five networks of house churches in Iran. In the book “Too Many to Jail”, he presents a unique insight into how the house churches were established and operated. The preface to the book (2014, p. 13) establishes that there were house churches in the country as early as the 1950s. However, it seems that the increased pressure against churches that accepted and

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<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Protestant Church and St. Peter's Evangelical Church defined themselves as Presbyterian churches. Both are closed in today's Iran. Of the six Protestant churches that participated in the Joint Council of Protestant Churches in Iran in 2006, it was these two churches, in addition to the Assembly of God Church in Tehran, who periodically conducted missionary work and baptised Muslims (Iranian pastor in Assembly of God, meeting in Tehran, November 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Pastor Robert Asserian was temporarily released on bail on 2 July 2013 after having been imprisoned for 43 days. The release was conditional on not saying anything about the case or the release to the media (Mohabat News 2013). In spring 2014, Mansour Borji told the Danish Immigration Service (DIS 2014, p. 33) that the case against Asserian had still not been dealt with in court. Landinfo has not found any more recent information about Asserian.

baptised Muslims, particularly after 2005, led to a major expansion of the house church phenomena.<sup>4</sup>

A house church is established when converts gather in private homes to get education in Christianity, read the Bible, pray and sing together and watch sermons on TV programmes in Persian via Christian satellite channels from abroad. As mentioned, YouTube and Skype are also used for preaching and teaching. Members of house churches also obtain religious materials from media such as Telegram, Instagram and WhatsApp (Chiaramonte 2016; Ellis 2016a; Mansour Borji, meeting in November 2016).

The degree of contact between house churches varies. Some are independent, or part of a local network without contact with organisations abroad. Others have an informal connection to churches abroad, or they are part of a more extensive network run by Iranian Christian organisations abroad, such as Elam Ministries and Pars Theological Center (ICHRI 2013a, p. 20).

Some of the individual house churches are referred to as “TV and Internet congregations”. These are small communities that can arise quickly after individuals have followed programmes on Christian TV channels, and gather interested friends and neighbours around them (NOAS et al. 2017, p. 42).

House churches that are part of a network are usually loosely affiliated, and the connections between them are more based on personal relationships and contacts than a predetermined organisational structure. As a rule, pastors act as links between house churches that are part of a network.<sup>5</sup> For security reasons, house churches are often small (Bradley 2014, p. 120; DIS 2014, p. 22-23; DIS, DRC & Landinfo 2013, p. 18-19).

As far as the management structure is concerned, there also seems to be some variation. In his research into five house church networks in Iran, Mark Bradley (2014, p. 117-141) found both what he characterised as a relatively hierarchical organisation and a more collegial and fluid structure (p. 142-143). His findings, however, show that the selection and training of new leaders has followed quite similar patterns in the five networks, as part of a strategy to spread the movement. Bradley describes how early house church leaders chose so-called “church planters” among their members, and that their task was to spread the gospel and recruit more members to new house churches (p. 120, 122-123, 129-130).

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<sup>4</sup> When Landinfo visited the main church of the Assembly of God in Tehran in 2006, a representative of the church said that members could organise house churches on their own initiative. The representative said the churches’ leaders did not control what the members did in private, and therefore he could not prevent it from happening. However, he said that the church itself had given in to government pressure and stopped organising house churches on its own in 2003-2004.

<sup>5</sup> The pastor is usually the oldest or the one who converted first of the members of a house church (UNHCR in Ankara, meeting in September 2016). Pastors have often taken courses in neighbouring countries such as Turkey or Armenia, or received training over Skype via Christian networks abroad.

Elam Ministries has, in an email to Landinfo (September 2017), described the leadership in most house churches as fluid or dynamic, stating that the reason for this is that leaders are often forced to flee because of persecution or fear of future persecution.

There are also theological differences between house churches. Some do not believe in the Trinity and baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and thus have a different understanding of Jesus than traditional Christianity (Small Media 2014, p. 54; DIS, DRC & Landinfo 2013, p. 15). The Church of Iran, which is probably Iran's largest network of house churches, is referred to in English-language sources as non-Trinitarian. In an article published on the Iranian-Christian news site Mohabat News (2016), the Church of Iran is referred to as a cult, of which several of the leaders were previously members of the Pentecostal Assembly of God. It is also stated that the network theologically follows or is inspired by the American evangelist William Branham (1909-1965). Mark Bradley (2014, p. 145-146) refers to these converts as the "Jesus Only" group, and points out that they, in particular, are found in the cities Rasht and Shiraz.

### **2.3.1 Recruitment to house churches**

Most Iranian Muslims who convert in Iran are introduced to Christianity through family members or friends. Others are introduced via Christian satellite TV programmes in Persian (ICHRI 2013a, p. 23; Bradley 2014, p. 122, 139).

The sources Landinfo met in the autumn of 2016, agreed that family and friends form the most important starting point for recruiting members to house churches. For example, Mansour Borji (meeting in November 2016) said that a house church at first starts with people who know each other. Usually, this means family members, but good friends and acquaintances who can be trusted can also be invited, and the network will grow.

Similarly, an Iranian pastor affiliated with a church in Ankara (meeting in Ankara, September 2016), said that house churches in Iran are mainly family-based, and that it is quite common for several family members to convert if one person in the family converts. This particularly applies to spouses and children, but can also be parents, in-laws, siblings and their families or other close relatives. As time goes by, the family network can expand to include trusted friends. However, such expansion may cause the network to be more easily detected because the more people who know a secret, the greater the possibility of one or more of them revealing themselves or being discovered. The pastor knew of a family network that had lasted for several years and eventually included about 50 people. The network was revealed when one of the last arrivals in the family behaved carelessly by talking about the network to a person they did not know particularly well. This person then told the authorities (meeting in September 2016).

A pastor and member of the elder council of the Church of Iran network (meeting in November 2016) pointed out that networks of house churches expand organically

using growth and relocation. For example, a family in a house church can move from one place to another and start a new house church with family and good friends. A new network is thus established.

Some of the sources talked about how they themselves had become members of a house church. For example, an Iranian convert with refugee status from UNHCR (meeting in Ankara in September 2016) said that he was introduced to Christianity by a close friend. As his interest in Christianity evolved, he was invited to the friend's house church, where most of the members belonged to the same family. Soon after, he introduced Christianity to his wife and several in-laws, who eventually declared themselves Christians.

A pastor in a Korean Protestant church in Turkey (meeting in Istanbul in September 2016) had a slightly different story. He said that as a student in Iran he had attended a house church in Tehran. When he and his family were to rent an apartment and the landlord wanted to know what religious affiliation the family had, he told them they were Christians. Eventually, the landlord said that he was also Christian and secretly ran a house church consisting of members of his own family. The Korean pastor, who in addition to studying discreetly conducted Christian missionary activities aimed at Muslims, was eventually invited to attend this house church.

## **2.4 NUMBERS OF CONVERTS**

There are no reliable figures on how many converts are living in Iran. According to Duane A. Miller (2015, p. 71-72), who is adjunct professor of theology at St. Mary's University in San Antonio (Texas),<sup>6</sup> it is particularly difficult to determine the number of converts of Muslim background in a country like Iran. Both Christian and Muslim sides may be motivated to underreport or exaggerate the number of converts. Furthermore, the precise meaning of what exactly is a convert, can be discussed. However, Miller claims that even if the number of converts is unknown, and the definition of who can be called a convert is unclear, it seems that the Christian underground movement has been growing after the Revolution.

Below are some estimates from different sources. The figures are inconsistent, but Landinfo has no basis for assessing which estimates there is reason to rely on.

In his research article, Miller (2015, p. 71) points to an anonymous, but well-informed source that estimated that in 2010, there were about 100,000 converts in Iran. These were people who had confirmed their belief in a Christian faith community, most likely a house church, and who, if circumstances allowed, regularly participated in a form of community. Some, but not all, had been baptised. Miller also refers to The Joshua Project, an initiative within the U.S. Center for World Mission, which as of October 2014 estimated the number of Christian ethnic Persians to be about 175,000. Most of

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<sup>6</sup> Miller is also a lecturer in church history and theology at the Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary (Israel). His main areas are religious conversion from Islam to Christianity (topic of his doctorate research) and the history of Protestant missions in the Middle East (Miller 2015, p. 66).

these were claimed to be converts of Shiite Muslim background. Some were also converts from Zoroastrianism or children of converts with Shiite Muslim backgrounds. Armenians and Assyrians were not included in these estimates (Miller 2015, p. 72).

Another figure is presented by the ICHRI report Cost of Faith from 2013. The report refers to a World Christian Database estimate from 2010 counting 66,000 Protestants in Iran. Of these, about 21,000 were officially recognised as Protestants, and consisted of both Christians from ethnic minorities and people who had converted before or just after the Revolution in 1979.<sup>7</sup> The others, about 45,000 people, were more recent converts that are not recognised by the government (ICHRI 2013a, p. 18).

A number of Christian organisations (as quoted in Latschan 2015; Aghajanian 2014; The Christian Institute 2014) operate with much higher estimates. Most range between 250,000 and 500,000 converts, and the number seems to be increasing. In 2014, The Christian Institute wrote that the Christian underground movement had an annual growth rate of about 20 percent.

In an email (September 2017) to Landinfo, Elam Ministries writes that there are no reliable statistics of Christian converts, but that all the information Elam has, clearly indicates that there are hundreds of thousands of Christians in Iran. Elam bases its assumptions on feedback from websites and social media, all the inquiries and requests via satellite TV and the high demand for Bibles.

Neither Mansour Borji nor an Iranian pastor and member of the elder council of the Church of Iran network (meeting in November 2016) could provide figures of converts in Iran. The pastor in the Church of Iran said that the network he belongs to (he lives in exile in a European country) is the largest on Iranian soil. He estimated that there were about 4,000 people connected to the network in 2016, and that about 1,000 of them lived in and around the city of Rasht. The rest mostly lived in Isfahan, Karaj and Tehran. He also pointed out that there are many other small and large networks and individual house churches, but emphasised that the number changes all the time. However, he could say with certainty that the number of converts and house churches had been steadily growing in recent years.

Mansour Borji pointed out that the many inquiries that Christian organisations abroad receive from Christians in Iran indicate that the house church movement has had a significant annual growth in recent years. He believed that the number of Christians was growing by about 20 percent per year. Like Elam Ministries, Borji pointed out that the estimates were made based on the high and increasing demand for Bibles, and the many inquiries and feedback that organisations receive from Iranians via the internet, social media, email and satellite TV channels.

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<sup>7</sup> As Landinfo understands it, “recognised Protestants” here refers to members (not converts) of churches who practise Protestantism (for example, the Armenian Protestant Church and the German Church), and members (converts) of other Protestant churches that were recognised before the 1979 Revolution.

### 3. REASONS FOR CONVERSION

The reasons that Muslim Iranians choose to convert, e.g. to Christianity, seem to be many and complex. Some examples are presented below.

A leader of the Christian organisation CCM Ministries<sup>8</sup> has claimed to Fox News (Chiaromonte 2016), that it is young people in particular who convert to Christianity in today's Iran. Many of Iran's youth are fed up with the regime's oppressive and religiously-rooted administration, according to this leader. They want social freedom, they are restless, they look for alternatives to Islam and perceive Western culture and Christianity as attractive. Converting or declaring oneself a Christian has become a form of counterculture against the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

In a lecture on Christian converts in Malta in May 2017, a representative of Elam Ministries presented several reasons why so many seem to be receptive to the Christian message. He claimed that many Iranians experience a love for Jesus Christ (who is also a respected prophet in Islam). Another reason is that the population has a disillusioned relationship with the Islamic regime and regards Islam in light of this. He also pointed out that Iranian identity is not primarily anchored in Islam, but in Iran's long and proud history from before the country became Muslim, and that religious tolerance is a tradition in Iran.

The Iranian-born journalist Ali Sadrzadeh referred to some of the same in his article *A Tsunami of Atheism* from 2013. In the article, he pointed out a development that has been noticeable in recent years: that many in Iran, particularly among the country's young people, have turned away from the government's strict interpretation of Islam. While some have sought other religious affiliations in traditional Sufism, New Age sects, Christianity or Buddhism, others have become non-believers or atheists.

In the book *Iran and Christianity: Historical Identity and Present Relevance* from 2008 (as quoted in Miller 2015, p. 75-76), Mark Bradley points to some historical aspects of Iranian culture that make the Christian message attractive for some (Shiite) Muslims. These are the concepts of suffering and vicarious atonement (martyrdom tradition), the notion that Islam was a form of socio-religious colonialism imposed on the land by Arab conquerors, and that the Old Testament in several places forms a positive image of ancient Persia.

An Iranian pastor and member of the elder council of the Church of Iran network told Landinfo (meeting in November 2016) that in his opinion, Iranians have different motives for turning to Christianity. For some, it is a matter of faith, and these are the "real converts". For others, it is a negative perception of Islam that motivates them to look for other alternatives, such as Christianity. Still others primarily want a baptism certificate to make it easier to emigrate or seek asylum in Europe or North America, according to the pastor.

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<sup>8</sup> CCM Ministries has been involved in the Christian underground movement in Iran for over 20 years.

According to an Iranian-born journalist living in the U.K. who is very familiar with the refugee and migration problems in Western Europe (meeting in November 2016), Christianity is a religion many in Iran come to know of through (banned) Hollywood movies and television series produced in Western countries. Many admire Western culture and perceive Christianity to be a religion that represents modernity and freedom for the individual. Movies and TV series give many Iranians the impression that in Western Christian culture “everything” is allowed, even for sexual minorities. In this sense, according to the journalist, interest in Christianity is a protest against the dominant religious culture in Iran, which many, and particularly the young part of the population, perceive as being too strict.

The journalist also stated that Iranians, in his opinion, are the least religious people in the Middle East. Nevertheless, this does not mean there are not those who seek out and become interested in religion, and in their quest find, for example, Christianity. The journalist also emphasised that Christianity as a religion has a solid position in Iran. Christianity is part of the country’s religious diversity, and Christians are not secluded minorities. As an example, he pointed out that the captain of the Iranian football team is a Christian Armenian and is a major public hero in football-interested Iran. Nor has he been reluctant to show his Christian faith in public, for example, by crossing himself on the field (see also PressTV 2016; Dehghan 2015; Lekic 2006).

As another example, the journalist referred to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, who in December 2015, in full public view, visited the home of an Assyrian-Christian war veteran. The veteran’s mother had baked a cake for the occasion. The Supreme Leader asked for a piece of cake, which he ate in front of the camera. The journalist emphasised that in a culture where many religiously conservative Muslims have traditionally perceived Christians as unclean, and where it was considered necessary to wash their hands after having shaken hands, this emerged as a strong and positive signal from the Supreme Leader.<sup>9</sup>

### **3.1 A NEGATIVE VIEW OF ISLAM**

Several of the sources Landinfo met on the fact-finding missions to Turkey and England in autumn 2016 pointed out that a negative view of Islam is an important reason that Iranians convert to Christianity.

Mansour Borji said (meeting in November 2016) that many Iranians have had enough of Islam and Islamic rule of law. In his opinion, similar to the Iranian-born journalist, Iran has the most secular population of all Muslim countries in the Middle East. At the same time, the government has not kept its promise with their Islamic rule of law – they have not made people’s lives better, particularly not on the spiritual plane.

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<sup>9</sup> The event the journalist referred to was published on Ayatollah Khamenei’s official website, and shows the leader’s visit to an Assyrian family who celebrated Christmas. The home visit was also featured on a Romanian Orthodox website (Pravoslavie 2016; Khamenei.ir 2015).

Therefore, many Iranians look for solutions elsewhere. The answers are found not only in Christianity, but also in Sufism, in other religions and in atheism.

A pastor affiliated with a Christian organisation in Istanbul (meeting in September 2016) believed that among some, there exists an outright hatred of Islam, which is a strong motive for converting to Christianity. He also noted that many people in Western countries do not understand how intrusive and strict religious practices can act counterproductively and instead create distance and resentment against Islam in the population.

This resentment was illustrated when two of the sources spoke about their own experiences with the Islamic regime during their upbringing in Iran.

An Iranian convert with refugee status from UNHCR (meeting in September 2016) told about how as a child he had renounced Islam as such. As a 12-year-old, together with his classmates and as part of the education, he had been present at a public execution by hanging. It was a terrible experience that affected him long afterwards. When he later questioned what had happened, he got the clear message from his teachers that the execution was deserved and that executions were the will of Allah and in accordance with Islamic law. Therefore, he was not allowed to criticise or question what happened. The experience itself and the answers he received eventually made him lose all confidence in Islam and religion in general. For a number of years, he had been an atheist, which also had some consequences when he did his military service. Because he did not appear to be a believer, an imam in the military repeatedly exposed him to disciplinary action. Among other things, he was denied leave when his mother became mortally ill. He also did not get leave to attend his mother's funeral.

A female convert living in a European country (meeting in November 2016) described how she was told throughout childhood about Islamic values, commandments and prohibitions. This was especially true at school, where education in Islam had a big place and where everyone had to learn Arabic to read the Qur'an in the original language, which she perceived as forced learning. Eventually, she became familiar with Christianity through family members and was able to compare the two religions. This was the beginning of her path to the Christian faith. She, along with her family, joined a network of house churches and lived as an active Christian for ten years before leaving the country for good.

### **3.2 THE UNDERGROUND MOVEMENT IS GROWING WITH INTERNATIONAL HELP**

Christian organisations in Western countries have for a number of years conducted systematic and targeted missionary activities in Persian aimed at the population of Iran. Several of these organisations have been established and are run by Iranian Christians living in exile (Small Media 2014, p. 57-64). In addition, there are active and extensive activities among Iranians and Persian-speaking Afghan asylum seekers and migrants in Iran's neighbouring areas (Ellis 2016b; Lane 2014).

The house church movement, which in many ways acts as an underground movement in Iran, grows with the help of these foreign organisations (Caballero 2016; Lane 2014). According to Mansour Borji, the movement would hardly exist in today's Iran without assistance from abroad (meeting in November 2016).

A good example is the Christian organisation Elam Ministries, which was established in 1990 with a base in the U.K. and the U.S. Elam is probably the most influential organisation that conducts missionary activities directed at the population of Iran (Elam Ministries n.d.; Ellis 2016b). Elam aims to spread Christianity in Iran by offering Christian literature and other guidance to Christians and interested Muslims throughout the country. Elam also organises networks of house churches in Iran, and provides training for pastors outside Iran who want to create and run networks.

According to Elam Ministries (lecture in Malta 2017; email September 2017), missionary work from abroad is done using satellite TV, websites, chat rooms, social media and apps. Inside the country, the Christian message is shared through personal contact, and by the distribution of the New Testament and Bibles.

Another organisation that conducts targeted missionary activities aimed at the population of Iran is the Pars Theological Center in London (Hartropp 2017). The organisation, which is established and run by Iranian Christians in exile, was founded in 2010 and educates Christian leaders in Iran to help further grow the house church movement. The Pars Theological Center wants to change the Iranian society by means of a grassroots movement based on the values of Jesus in an Iranian way. A spokesperson told *The Christian Times* in 2016 that at least 200 Iranian Christians had received training at the Pars Theological Center to become the next generation of leaders and contribute to the continued growth of the house church movement (Caballero 2016).

The Pars Theological Center has developed study programmes for their students in Iran, and teaches by using video lectures, books and other materials in digital format. Most of the teaching takes place in private homes using a PC. The students in Iran keep in touch with teachers and supervisors via email.<sup>10</sup> This allows them to submit their tasks and receive feedback on a regular basis. In addition, Pars offers courses through two TV channels that can be viewed in Iran. Students living in Iran can also attend Pars' conferences held in other countries (Smith 2016).

Open Doors USA also runs a Christian mission aimed at the population of Iran. On the website, the organisation says that it supports Persian-speaking Christians by distributing Bibles and other Christian literature and through training, media projects and advocacy (Open Doors USA 2017a; 2017b).

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<sup>10</sup> Smith (2016) does not provide details on the manner in which email correspondence to and from Iran occurs, nor the considerations those who send or receive such emails make with regard to surveillance from the Iranian authorities.

An Iranian pastor and member of the elder council of the Church of Iran network (meeting in November 2016) confirmed that pastors are sent to Iran to train converts. These may eventually be tasked to and given authority to act as pastors in house churches. According to the pastor, it is the model of the Bible itself that they follow. As Jesus taught his disciples, new Iranian pastors train new converts.

### **3.3 MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES ON IRANIAN SOIL**

When asked how the Christian message is conveyed in Iran, an Iranian pastor and member of the elder council in the Church of Iran (meeting in November 2016), said that there is a big difference between liberal and conservative areas in the country. These differences have great significance, and must be taken into account by anyone wishing to convey the Christian message in Iran.

The pastor confirmed that missionary activities and secret baptisms continue to occur to some degree, despite noticeably greater government pressure and less room for manoeuvre than before. He also noted that all leaders and core personnel in the Church of Iran have been arrested, and that some have also been sentenced to imprisonment.<sup>11</sup> The government had implicitly given the leaders the opportunity to leave Iran, but they had refused the offer and chosen to stay (read more about this topic in part 2, chapter 4 of the report, called Travel bans versus pressure to leave the country).<sup>12</sup>

In a conversation on the same topic, a Korean pastor affiliated with a Korean Protestant church (meeting in Istanbul in September 2016) said that a group of missionaries from South Korea had been very active in Iran from 2006 to 2009. Over a three-month period for four consecutive years, about 200 Korean missionaries had operated in several cities from Rasht to the Iranian island of Kish in the Persian Gulf. They spread the Christian message by openly distributing flyers and CDs with Christian content to Iranians in public places, including in parks. In addition, they held Christian meetings in private homes where they could gather from 40 to 60 people each time. In 2009, all Koreans were expelled and have been denied from returning. A Korean pastor was arrested and threatened with 8 years in prison, but was released after diplomatic negotiations and deported to South Korea.

UNHCR in Ankara (meeting in September 2016) was also aware that South Korean Protestant Christians had been active in Iran before 2009. Following the unrest and subsequent impediments that followed the controversial presidential election in 2009, missionary work via satellite TV, the Internet and social media became the most important means of communicating. This has continued. UNHCR also pointed out that Elam Ministries is active and operates a network of house churches.

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<sup>11</sup> Landinfo has not found information that directly confirms the pastor's statements, but we are aware that many members of this network have been imprisoned (as stated by Elam Ministries 2016), and that the network has long been a target for government action (Home Office UK 2013, p. 152).

<sup>12</sup> A profiled member of the Church of Iran network left Iran in 2017.

According to the report *Women Rise Above in the Middle East*, published spring 2017 by Open Doors USA, women play a key role in the house church movement in Iran. They practise as preachers, Sunday school teachers and increasingly as leaders of house churches. This puts them in a vulnerable position, both towards their own families and the authorities. It is also claimed that women are at the forefront of the spread of Christianity in Iran, and that they let neither persecution, imprisonment nor fear stop them from following Christ (Open Doors USA 2017a, p. 4-5).

That women have a central place in the house church movement is also emphasised by Mark Bradley (2014, p. 157). He quotes a source saying that 70 per cent of the leaders in the community are women.

### **3.4 ACCESS TO BIBLES**

Bibles translated into Persian are available and can be purchased in Iran, although to a limited extent. Several editions of the Bible have been published by Iranian publishing companies and are available in bookstores in Iran. During a fact-finding mission in Iran in 2015, Landinfo's employee purchased a bound Bible in a randomly chosen bookstore in Tehran. The employee asked to buy a Bible and was then offered a bound, Persian translation of the New Testament, published by the Iranian publisher Nashreney in 2008. The publishing company advertises the release on its Persian-language website (Nashreney 2008).

During a previous visit to Iran in 2011, Landinfo visited the main church of the Assembly of God in Tehran, and was able to buy Elam's edition of the New Testament, which was for sale in the church's bookstore. It is thus legal to buy, sell or possess Bibles for personal use, but sales and distribution in connection with missionary work is prohibited.

According to a pastor and member of the elder council of the Church of Iran network (meeting in November 2016), house churches mainly use Bibles in Persian that are printed abroad and smuggled into Iran and distributed via individuals and networks. Previously, converts used the old editions of the Bible, which are found in several editions in Persian. The pastor noted that the new translations are better because they have a more modern style of language.

Elam Ministries in the U.K. is central to this work. In 2014, the organisation published a new edition of the New Testament in Persian. At the same time as the release, a plan was announced to smuggle 300,000 bibles into Iran over three years (Ellis 2016b; The Christian Institute 2014; World Watch Monitor 2014). In an email to Landinfo in September 2017, Elam said that the organisation had printed 1.6 million copies of the New Testament and hundreds of thousands of Bibles in Persian. Many of these had been sent to Iran, others were sent to Persian-speaking Christians elsewhere in the world.

## 4. GOVERNMENT ATTITUDES AND REACTIONS

### 4.1 FORM OF GOVERNMENT – CONDITIONS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Iran's formal name is *Jomhuri-ye Islam-ye Iran*, the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Republic is a theocratic system based on a strict interpretation of Shiite Islam. The law is based on Islamic law and principles. The Constitution stipulates that the Shiite Muslim school of law, Ja'fari, is the official religion of the state (Constitution 1979, cf. §§ 1 and 12).

The school of law permeates the official Iran at all levels. All Iranians must have a religious identity in an official context. When on Iranian soil, all persons, regardless of nationality, gender, religious affiliation and personal relationship with religion, must in the public space and in relation to the Iranian authorities comply with the rules and norms based on Islamic principles (U.S. Department of State 2015; Mousavi 2014).<sup>13</sup>

In general, the government regards religious pluralism beyond their control as a security risk (Khalaji 2013). Iran does not have freedom of association, and all organised activity, whether political, religious or cultural, must be applied for and authorised by the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Elam Ministries, email 2017; ICHRI 2013b, p. 32). Activities that are considered to undermine or threaten the legitimacy and stability of the Islamic regime are not allowed and may have criminal consequences.

The regime bases its legitimacy on Islam being the religion of the people, and that the government exercises the will of the people through an Islamic regime. Any religious movement that differs from or provides an alternative to orthodox Shiite Islam is interpreted as a threat to the state itself. Religious activists are therefore viewed with suspicion and risk being prosecuted.

This policy has been practised with varying intensity throughout the history of the Islamic Republic. It creates a framework and applies restrictions on all of Iran's religious and ethnic minorities' ability to express and retain their distinctive character and interests in public spaces (Amnesty International 2017; U.S. Department of State 2017). All religious minorities are subject to different forms of discrimination and restrictions on religious practice. This applies to Sunni Muslims (the country's largest religious minority), Shiite Muslim minorities and non-Muslim minorities such as Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians, who are recognised in the Constitution. This also applies to minorities without official status, such as Islamic mystics (Sufis), Kurdish Yārsān (Ahl-e Haq), Mandeans, Yezids, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and particularly Bahá'í,

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<sup>13</sup> See also Landinfo's query response "Iran: Blasfemi og ateisme" (Iran: Blasphemy and atheism) (2017, 6 February): [https://landinfo.no/asset/3496/1/3496\\_1.pdf](https://landinfo.no/asset/3496/1/3496_1.pdf) [downloaded 3 November 2017].

which are declared illegal by the government (USCIRF 2017; Sofiamo 2015; Sadrzadeh 2013; Chehabi 2009).

Restrictions on minorities' religious freedom and religious practise have been widely criticised, including from human rights organisations and the U.N. Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran (see, for example, Amnesty International 2017; UNSR 2017, p. 16-17; UNSR 2015, p. 13-15).

In a meeting with Landinfo in November 2016, representatives of Amnesty International pointed out that education in Islam is mandatory in Iranian schools. Exceptions are only made to children whose parents belong to approved minorities. Children of converts must therefore learn about Islam at school, because officially they are born of Muslim parents and thereby they are considered Muslims.

## **4.2 GOVERNMENT POLICY – APOSTASY AND NATIONAL SECURITY**

Leaving Islam – apostasy – is prohibited by the Iranian interpretation of Islamic law and is punishable by death for a man and life in prison for a woman until she potentially repents and returns to Islam. Alternatively, apostasy from Islam may result in loss of civil rights. For both genders, this can have consequences with regard to employment, pension, marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance (DIS, DRC & Landinfo 2013, p. 8-9).

However, apostasy from Islam is not mentioned in the Penal Code. Proposals that apostasy from Islam should be regulated were included in a previous draft of the Penal Code, but were removed when the law came into force in 2013. This means that such acts are governed by traditional Islamic law, which is also valid law and used by Iranian courts. Paragraph 167 of the Constitution stipulates that in cases where a matter is not covered by codified law, the court shall use traditional Islamic law. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini (dead 1989), argued for the death penalty for apostasy in his legal deliberations (Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Tahrir Al-Wasilah*). These deliberations have status as a source of law in Iran (ICHRI 2013a, p. 30).

Although it is not uncommon for arrested converts to be threatened with possible apostasy charges (Landinfo 2017, p. 11), it is very rare that it has actually happened. This is shown by the practise of Iranian prosecuting authorities and courts. In the history of Islamic Republic (from 1979 up to today), only on very rare occasions have Christian converts been charged with apostasy (IHRDC 2014b, p. 15, 29-35; ICHRI

2013a, p. 31-32).<sup>14</sup> It is also rare that converts have been convicted of blasphemy (ICHRI 2013a, p. 10; more about this in Landinfo 2017, p. 12).<sup>15</sup>

Organised Christian activity and contact with Christian organisations abroad is instead defined as political activity and as a threat against the country's Islamic identity and national security (Open Doors USA 2017b; World Watch Monitor 2016). Consequently, it is the intelligence services that monitor, arrest and interrogate converts,<sup>16</sup> and prosecutions are held before the Revolutionary Court (ICHRI 2013a, p. 49).

This approach to the missionary Christian communities began to take shape as early as 2005 (ICHRI 2013a, p. 7),<sup>17</sup> but has become a more pronounced and prominent policy in recent years. This has coincided with the increased intensity of government actions against Christian converts after the presidential election in June 2009, which resulted in waves of arrests during Christmas that same year (Bradley 2014, p. 186). In October 2010, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei gave a speech in the holy city of Qom, where he declared Bahá'í, Sufism (Islamic mysticism), the Sunni Muslim denominations of Wahhabism and the house churches as a threat to national security. The speech has been seen as a signal to intelligence services to use more resources to monitor and act against these communities (DIS 2014, p. 26).

The reason why Iranian authorities define the organised house church movement to be a threat against national security, is that they relate the movement's activities to political opposition activities. House church meetings are conducted in secret, which means that the government can neither control who participates nor what happens in the meetings. The government therefore consider the meetings to be a potential source of opposition activity that can threaten the regime. Furthermore, there is contact between many house churches and foreign communities. This kind of Western connection is perceived by the authorities as suspect, and as a threat to the regime.

Iranian authorities consider Christian missionary work and proliferation of Western and secular values within the country to be an attempt from Western countries, including Israel, to destroy Islam and Iranian culture and undermine its Islamic rule of law (DIS 2014, p. 7-8). A number of government officials have defined the form of

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<sup>14</sup> Apostasy charges that have been raised against Christian converts have led to great international condemnation. This may be a reason why Iranian authorities have abandoned using this charge (DIS 2014, p. 8). The last case in which a convert was charged with apostasy was the case against Yousef Naderkhani (Pastor of the Church of Iran), who was arrested on 13 October 2009. This case gained great international media coverage when the Iranian Supreme Court confirmed a death sentence against him. The sentence was later converted into 3 years' imprisonment (DIS 2014, p. 7; more about Naderkhani in Landinfo 2017, p. 13).

<sup>15</sup> Blasphemy is governed by the new Penal Code §§ 262-263 (Penal Code 2013), and in the old Penal Code, Book 5, § 513 (Penal Code 1996/2013, Book 5). Book 5 of the old Penal Code continues to apply.

<sup>16</sup> Both the Revolutionary Guard's intelligence services, subject to the Supreme Leader, and the intelligence services subject to the Intelligence Department (Ministry of Intelligence and Security - MOIS) and the President, participate in activities aimed at the house church movement (ICHRI 2013a, p. 57-58).

<sup>17</sup> According to ICHRI (2013a, p. 7), since 2005 the government has accused arrested Christian converts of security-related crimes.

Christianity practised in the house church movement as a deviant and false form of Christianity and house churches as corrupt sects (ICHRI 2013a, p. 24-26). A representative of Elam Ministries pointed out in a lecture about Christian converts (Malta, May 2017) that Iran is a theocracy where apostasy from Islam is not only a religious issue, but also a political one. Apostates (Muslims who leave Islam) are seen as a threat to the regime, and Christians who conduct missions aimed at Muslims are considered possible spies for the West and Israel.

Consequently, house churches are perceived as oppositional communities and members have increasingly been subjected to the same treatment as political dissidents, including arrests, use of release with high bail in some cases and accusations of contact with Western countries' governments and Iranian opposition movements abroad (see, for example, ICHRI 2013a, p. 50; Christians in Parliament 2015, p. 17- 18;<sup>18</sup> Landinfo 2017). Parallel with the increased pressure on house churches, the oppression of many other groups in Iranian society, including lawyers, human rights activists, journalists and religious and ethnic minorities has been stepped up.

### **4.3 ARRESTS AND PROSECUTION**

Issues related to arrests and prosecution of converts requires more space and a more thorough review than allowed for in this report. The topic is instead addressed in part 2 of the report, Iran: Christian converts and house churches (2) - arrests and prosecutions (Iran: Kristne konvertitter og hjemmekirker (2) - arrestasjoner og straffeforfølgelse). Here Landinfo presents the cases of a variety of converts who have been prosecuted in recent years, and tries to map their activity profile (see Landinfo 2017).

In the following, Landinfo will briefly mention some patterns in the authorities' reactions.

The vast majority of Christian converts who have been arrested in recent years have been affiliated with house church communities. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, over 600 Christians have been arrested in various places in Iran since 2010. As of December 2016, about 90 Christians were in custody, in prison or awaiting trial due to their faith and activity (USCIRF 2017).

In recent years, a number of house churches have been subjected to raids where all present have been brought in for questioning. Officials from the intelligence services have also searched homes and seized mobile phones, PCs, CDs, religious literature and papers considered to be evidence in the case. However, most have usually been released within a short period of time in return for a promise not to continue the activity, while some of the arrestees have been held in detention for a period and/or

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<sup>18</sup> This is shown here in an appendix to the report, which is a letter written by the former UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed.

been prosecuted (see, for example, DIS 2014, p. 28; U.S. Department of State 2017, p. 13; Bradley 2014, p. 250).

Converts are sometimes released against a very high bail, while no formal charges are made. The bail may be so high that the prisoner's family must use the family home as collateral. It is a very common practice within the Iranian judicial system to impose personal restrictions on people who are considered to be dissidents (see, for example, ACCORD 2017, p. 15; Christians in Parliament 2015, p. 12).

However, release on bail does not mean that charges against the person are dropped. Arrested converts who are released on bail must, according to Amnesty International (meeting in November 2016), must expect the charge to be upheld for a long time. If the government finds that a person in such a situation is participating in a house church, they can expect the authorities to act. Amnesty's representatives asserted that the authorities deliberately use this type of pressure in an attempt to restrict people's room for manoeuvre (see also Landinfo 2017, p. 21).

Amnesty's representatives also pointed to the general lack of legal security in interrogations and in the court system, and mentioned that police and intelligence services use torture to pressure confessions from political prisoners. If the accused has access to a lawyer at all, it may be that they cannot meet with the lawyer before immediately prior to trial. According to Amnesty, it is very doubtful a person will get a fair trial if they are charged with political crimes.

Converts found guilty of spreading the Christian message to Muslims, organising house churches or conducting other outwardly-directed activities have been convicted to imprisonment from 2 to 6 years. It has also happened that converts have been sentenced to stricter penalties (Latschan 2015). In summer 2014, ten converts were sentenced to 10 years in prison, while one received a sentence of 15 years (CHRI 2017; Landinfo 2017, p. 14-17).

#### **4.3.1 Which converts are most vulnerable to arrest and prosecution?**

The question of which converts are most vulnerable to prosecution, and what it is like to live as a Christian convert in Iran, was put to several of the sources Landinfo met during the fact-finding missions in autumn 2016.

Representatives of Amnesty International in London (meeting in November 2016) said that no one can live openly as a convert in Iran. Only those born into officially approved religious minorities can publicly express their religious affiliation without it causing reactions from the authorities.

Amnesty's representatives pointed out that those who organise and lead house churches stand the greatest risk of being arrested and prosecuted. At the same time, they also pointed out that members may be at risk because Iranian authorities act in highly unpredictably ways. This unpredictability is part of the system's logic of oppression.

Amnesty's representatives also noted that anyone who starts an illegally organised Christian activity may risk the activity being discovered. If this occurs, the government will initiate surveillance, and at some point they may arrest and prosecute all involved. It was further pointed out that the authorities consider conversion to Christianity to be a matter of national security. In principle, therefore, any convert risks being charged pursuant to security laws (see Penal Code 1996/2013, Book 5<sup>19</sup> §§ 498-512), which is a serious charge in Iran.

A representative of Human Rights Watch (meeting in Istanbul in September 2016) believed that Iranian authorities are hardly interested in individual converts. However, when the intelligence services discover that a private home is a gathering place for organised activity, they can become interested. Like Amnesty International, the representative pointed out that it is primarily the organisations and those who work as missionaries and distribute religious literature (such as Bibles) to Muslims who attract attention. The degree or extent of organisation can be the deciding factor for whether the government is interested, according to the representative.

The pastor and member of the elder council of the Church of Iran network (meeting in November 2016) also said that it is primarily those who actively evangelise to Muslims, open their home for house churches and thus contribute to organised activities who risk being prosecuted. For security reasons, it is therefore common to rotate the hosting of house church meetings.

An Iranian pastor affiliated with a Christian organisation in Istanbul (meeting in September 2016) said that a person can live as a convert and participate in house churches so long as they conform to social norms and the framework of Iranian society. The pastor said that what happens within a family is not, or should not be, an issue per se. However, if the activities become visible in the public space, it may become a problem. As an example, the pastor told of a family who had moved meetings in their house church out to the roof terrace of their home. There, they played guitar and sang and became both visible and audible. The neighbours asked them to stop, but the activities continued. Finally, a neighbour reported the family to the police.

A female convert living in a European country (meeting in November 2016) pointed out that the personal attitudes of government officials can determine what it is like to live as an active convert in Iran. She explained it by giving two examples from her own life. When her brother was arrested for Christian activity, she was called in for questioning at the intelligence service, where she stated that she was also Christian. The government official expressed respect for her faith, but told her not to spread it to others. She then answered that if anyone asked her about her faith, she would tell them she was a Christian. The answers she gave were accepted and she was allowed to leave.

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<sup>19</sup> The Iranian Penal Code, the Islamic Penal Code, consists of five books. A new version of the law that came into force in 2013 includes books 1-4 (paragraphs 1-728). However, the old version of book 5 (paragraphs 498-792) from 1996 still applies (except for certain paragraphs repealed by the new law). This means that the numbering from the new law overlaps the numbering of the old one for paragraphs over 498, and that for these, reference must be made to the actual book in addition to the paragraph (IHRDC 2013; 2014a).

When she later applied for a passport, she told the passport office that she was a Christian. The passport issuer registered it, and she was issued a passport and could leave Iran in the normal way through ordinary border control. However, the woman knew of another convert who had told of their Christian faith to another passport office and who had problems getting a passport as a result of that (meeting in November 2016).

These personal experiences are not necessarily representative of what is typical for government agencies' treatment of converts. However, they illustrate that government officials may have differing attitudes and that the treatment of converts can vary and be highly dependent on the person.

See also part 2, chapter 3.5 of the report; Patterns of state reactions (Landinfo 2017).

## **5. REACTIONS FROM FAMILY AND LOCAL COMMUNITY**

During the trips in autumn 2016, Landinfo asked several of the sources if they knew of cases where converts have been reported to the authorities by family or friends because of the conversion.

An Iranian pastor in Ankara (meeting in September 2016) had heard of several cases where converts had been turned in by family to the police or intelligence services, but did not personally know anyone who had experienced it.

Neither did the Iranian convert with refugee status from UNHCR (meeting in September 2016) have personal knowledge of such cases. However, he said that his own family had been sharply divided in their view of his and his wife's conversion and participation in a house church. Two of his sisters were very religious and when they learned of the conversion, they had reacted by distancing themselves from him. They would no longer have anything to do with him and broke off all contact. His father and brother, on the other hand, have expressed cautious support, while others in the family circle expressed concern for the consequences the conversion could have for him. However, no one in the family threatened him, and he had no reason to believe he had been reported by his own family.

In conversations about the extent of being reported, several of the sources spoke of a mentality characterised by protection of family privacy on the one hand, and distrust of the authorities on the other. At the same time, the sources knew of specific cases where people had been reported.

For example, a pastor affiliated with a Christian organisation in Istanbul (meeting in September 2016) said that in Iranian culture, there is a fundamental scepticism towards allowing the government to gain access to a family's private matters. However, under certain circumstances, family members can still report their own, and this has happened. But, the pastor believed that reporting one's own family members was more

of an issue in the past, right after the Islamic Revolution (1979) and during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), when the conditions in the country were very different than now. In his opinion, most Iranians today have little trust in the government. In general, the population is now more used to hearing about Christianity because of all the sermon programmes that can be viewed via satellite TV in central parts of the country.

Like the pastor, Amnesty International pointed out (meeting in November 2016) that in Iranian culture, it is ethically unacceptable to report members of one's own family to the authorities. Nevertheless, Amnesty's representatives knew of examples where people with connections to the Revolutionary Guard had reported their own children and brothers for activities critical of the regime.<sup>20</sup>

Mansour Borji (meeting in November 2016) also said that it was primarily the government that monitor Christian converts, not the family or society in general. He reasoned that Iranians are basically tolerant of religious matters and have a general mistrust of the government. However, he knew of cases where families would warn the person who wanted to convert and had thus reported them. When the authorities then got involved, the case became far more serious than what the family had imagined or wanted.

In religious and conservative families, there may be more of an incentive to report a family member. The pastor affiliated with a Christian organisation in Istanbul (meeting in September 2016) said that house churches are essentially family-based, and thus in principle closed to outsiders. Therefore, when someone is reported to the authorities, it may be a family member who is behind it. The reason may be that the conversion is perceived to bring embarrassment to the entire family. Those who report a house church or network to the authorities will also be able to appear as a loyal person and a true believer.

Mansour Borji also knew of very conservative people who had deliberately reported conversions in their own family. He said that this could happen, but that in reality it is rare.

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<sup>20</sup> Amnesty elaborated on this information in an email to Landinfo dated 23 October 2017. In the email, Amnesty referred to a person from the country's Turkish minority, who in 1994 was arrested after having been reported to the Revolutionary Guard by a family member. The man was sentenced to death, but the sentence was converted to life in prison. Amnesty has recently published a report on the case: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde13/7327/2017/en/> [downloaded 11 November 2017].

## 6. CIVIL MATTERS

### 6.1 ENTERING MARRIAGE

Iran's family law is governed by the Civil Code of 1985. Terms and procedures for entering marriage are governed in book 7 (§§ 1034-1119).

Iran does not have civil marriage. Iranians who enter marriage must first marry religiously (according to Shiite Muslim, Sunni Muslim, Jewish, Christian or Zoroastrian family law) and then register the marriage in the civil registry. Registration in the civil registry is a condition for the marriage to be valid under the law, and for civil status changes to be registered correctly in personal documents.

This means that Iranians who, according to their personal documents, are Muslims, but in practice are Christians, have no choice but to conduct a Muslim wedding.

In Islam, marriage is a civil contract.<sup>21</sup> A Muslim marriage in Iran means signing a marriage contract designed in accordance with Islamic rules in the presence of a Muslim clergy or other public official. It is common to quote some verses from the Quran during the ceremony when the marriage contract is signed.

Topics related to Christian converts' entering marriage in Iran were discussed with some of the sources Landinfo met on the trips in autumn 2016.

In general, Amnesty International (meeting in November 2016) said that weddings according to Christian traditions would not be approved as a marriage by the Iranian authorities if it was known that the couple has a Muslim background.

When asked what converts in Iran do in a purely practical sense when entering into marriage, an Iranian pastor affiliated with a church in Ankara (meeting in September 2016) said that these types of problems, in his opinion, can mostly be solved with a bribe. This way, one can get married without the Muslim religious aspects being part of the wedding, or by them being toned down during the ceremony. In general, he believed that the Bible stipulated that Christians should live according to the laws of the country in which they live. The most important thing, according to the pastor, is not external formalities, but what is in the individual's heart and mind.

A pastor affiliated with a Christian organisation in Istanbul (meeting in September 2016) said that the Pentecostal Assembly of God church in Tehran had encouraged its members to marry in a Muslim way. But, as the church did not consider the couple to be properly married in the eyes of God, a Christian wedding would subsequently be held in the church. He also said that the Presbyterian Emmanuel Church (Church of Emmanuel) in Tehran had been authorised to marry its members, despite the fact that

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<sup>21</sup> The Catholic and Orthodox Churches regard marriage as a sacrament. The various Protestant denominations view marriage as instituted by God, but also as a worldly matter, subject to national law.

the authorities knew that the church members consisted of converts of Muslim background.

## **6.2 REGISTRATION OF BIRTHS AND NAMES**

In Iran, all births should be registered in the civil registry during the first few weeks after birth. The parents are responsible for ensuring that the registration occurs. When registering, the child gets a name and a personal identity document (NOCR, n.d.).

Name choices can be problematic for converts, particularly if they want to give their child a specifically Christian name. The parents may have a hard time explaining such a name to the civil registry and may cause the conversion to be revealed.

Questions about whether converts can avoid giving their children Muslim names and how this is done from a purely practical perspective was posed to several of the sources Landinfo met in 2016.

An Iranian pastor affiliated with a church in Ankara (meeting in September 2016), stated that, in his opinion, it should not be particularly problematic. He said that Iranian parents can choose between Arab-Islamic names and Persian names for their children. The epic national poem *Shahnameh* (The King's Book) by Ferdowsi is a good source of Persian names and there are also other sources. The pastor also pointed out that there are plenty of names in the Bible that have their version in the Quran, and that therefore it should not be a problem avoiding Muslim names.

A pastor affiliated with a Christian organisation in Istanbul (meeting in September 2016) also said it should not be a practical problem to give non-Muslim names to children of converts. He knew of examples where parents (converts) had informed the civil registry that they were Christians and wanted to give their child a name from the Bible. The choice of name was rejected at first, but when the parents could show where the name in question was in the Bible (which is recognised as a holy book in Islam), they were allowed to use it and the name was registered.

A pastor and member of the elder council of the Church of Iran network (meeting in November 2016) said that Christian converts who wanted to give their child a Christian name usually referred to Iranian law and argued that they had the right. The authorities might then approve, but it had also happened that people had been arrested for wanting to give their children Christian names. He therefore believed that insisting on giving a child a Christian name could give parents problems with the authorities or that the child might have problems in the future.

The pastor in the Church of Iran also said that the church at one point in time had initiated a legal trial to determine whether Christian converts had the right to give children Christian names under the Constitution. According to the pastor, the church finally won the case in the Iranian Supreme Court, despite the fact that the church was unregistered and illegal. However, due to the changed domestic policy conditions during Ahmadinejad's eight-year presidency (2005-2013), the Supreme Court ruling

was not implemented. The pastor added that such a lawsuit would not be possible in Iran today.

## **7. CHOOSING BETWEEN STAYING IN IRAN OR GOING INTO EXILE**

Many converts stay in Iran for a long time, despite the restrictions they face in terms of openness about their faith and religious practise. Some never leave the country. Two central sources Landinfo spoke with in November 2016 reported their views on why this is so.

A pastor affiliated with the elder council of the Church of Iran said that even if some converts wanted to emigrate to a Western country, they would stay in Iran because they lack the economic and human resources needed to leave the country. Others remain simply because they do not want to live in exile. They do not want to live in a country other than Iran and therefore adapt to the restrictions that apply to religious practise in Iranian society, according to the pastor.

The pastor also pointed out that some converts choose to leave Iran to give their children a better future. Still others know that the religious activities they are conducting can lead to personal danger, but do not want to leave Iran until they experience pressure so great or the situation becomes so difficult that they no longer think they have any choice. Among these are also converts who have been arrested and who, upon release, were directly or indirectly told by the government that it would be best if they left the country. The pastor also described those who feel they have a religious calling. They consider it key that someone stays and proclaims the Christian message on Iranian soil, no matter what the price they may personally risk paying.

According to Mansour Borji, there are many Iranians who are accustomed to taking certain precautions in their daily lives, because so much in their daily life and lifestyle is either contrary to the official ideology of the authorities or is directly punishable. In his opinion, many Iranians therefore develop a relaxed view of security. Risking something that can be unsafe or dangerous, such as arrest, is something they have learned to live with. What is “safe” in Iran is very relative, and Iranians are used to uncertainty. Borji also pointed out that when intelligence services have succeeded in infiltrating multiple networks of house churches, it is precisely because many Iranians have such a relaxed approach to security.

Borji emphasised that the private lives of many Iranians are quite different from how it appear on the outside. Privately, many people consume alcohol, watch Western movies, listen to Western popular music and dress differently than traditional Islamic values prescribe. Iranians are used to dealing with this duality. Borji knew of Christians in Iran who want to stay because they are not in the authorities’ spotlight.

He also knew of people who had conducted activities that had led to imprisonment, e.g. for a year. They served their sentence and then stayed in their home country. But when the sentence is too long, or the persecution too serious, and they risk 8 to 15 years in prison, people move or flee abroad. Borji said he knew a Christian leader who had the choice between 15 years in prison or leaving Iran. He chose to leave his home country. However, Borji emphasised that people are different. Some want to leave if they perceive a threat, while others choose to serve a sentence and stay in Iran.

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