

Report

Iran: Christian converts and house churches (2) – arrests and prosecutions



LANDINFO

Utlendingsforvaltningens fagenhet for landinformasjon

Translation provided by the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons, Belgium

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LANDINFO – 29 NOVEMBER 2017

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Report Iran: Christian converts and house churches (2) – arrests and prosecutions

SUMMARY

Over the last decade, Iranian authorities have intensified the monitoring and repression of activities among Protestant Christians who have converted from Islam. While the traditional ethnic-based churches found among Armenians and Assyrians are allowed to practise their religion within the framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran, missionary activity among Muslims and organized activities among converts have been combatted by closure of churches, arrests and criminal prosecution. During the summer of 2017 a number of exceptionally long prison sentences were issued for evangelizing and other activities related to house churches.

Available information indicates that converts are largely convicted for some sort of activity and not for the conversion itself. The information further seems to indicate that it is usually leaders and persons with a prominent role, or who are accused by the authorities for having such a role, who receive the harshest sentences. Other factors that seem to influence court decisions are various forms of activities, such as contact with churches abroad, internet activity, money transfers, acting as host for a house church, or repeated activity after having been arrested once.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report is part 2 of a two-part publication about Christian converts in Iran. Part 1, which is published simultaneously with this report, provides a broader presentation of the conditions for Christian converts in Iran. This includes the emergence of the house church community, reasons for the movement's growth, and the authorities' approach to the activities that occur in the house churches. See Landinfo 2017, Iran: Christian converts and house churches (1) – prevalence and conditions for religious practice.

Over the last decade, Iranian authorities have intensified the monitoring and repression of activities among Protestant Christians who have converted from Islam. While the traditional ethnic-based churches found among Armenians and Assyrians are allowed to practise their religion within the framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran, missionary activities among Muslims and organised activities among converts have been combatted by closure of churches, arrests and criminal prosecution (Finnish Immigration Service 2015).

Protestant churches that existed before the Iranian Revolution in 1979 could continue their activities for several years after the revolution, despite the fact that they admitted members who had been Muslims. These convert churches¹ were eventually subjected to increasingly greater restrictions, and by 2013, almost all were closed. Because conversion from Islam is prohibited and Christian converts today are not able to seek out official churches, a network of "house churches" has emerged. These are small groups of Christians who meet to worship in private homes (Bradley 2014, p. 177-181). The Iranian government has declared the operation of these house churches illegal (UNSR 2016, p. 17).

The organisation Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which follows developments in Iran, has noticed that there was an increase in the number of convictions of Christian converts in the summer of 2017. At the same time, the imposition of unusually long prison sentences for missionary work and other activities connected to house churches has been a feature of the development. While previous legal practice was to impose a maximum of 5 years in prison in such circumstances, in July 2017, 16 sentences of between 5 and 10 years were delivered, in addition to one sentence of entire 15 years (CSW 2017d).

This report concerns arrests and prosecutions of Christian converts in Iran, focusing on developments during the last decade. A few lines are, however, drawn between this decade and to the developments that took place after the revolution in 1979. The report gives a brief description of current penal codes and the extent of arrests. An attempt is also made to map the activity profiles of detainees and convicted people, based on cases presented by selected sources.

Legal terms such as arrest, imprisonment, indictment and prosecution are not always used consistently by the various sources referenced in the report. Arrest here means any apprehension or seizure by the police or security forces. Imprisonment is used both

¹ Convert church here means Protestant churches where a significant proportion of the members consist of people with a Muslim background who have converted to Christianity.

for putting a detainee in custody and for a prisoner's serving of a sentence. Some sources use the terms accusation and indictment interchangeably. Accusations are claims raised during the investigation, while indictment refers to the formal charges made in a criminal case. It may therefore be that these terms are not always used consistently in statements by the sources.

There are no reliable estimates of the number of Christian converts in Iran, and the estimates made by various organisations are inconsistent. World Christian Database estimated in 2010 that the total number of Christians in Iran was 270,000 people, of which about 67,000 were Protestants (mainly converts) (ICHRI 2013, p. 6).²

1.1 SOURCES

The report is based on open, English-language news sources, reports from human rights organisations, Christian organisations, the UN and other countries' immigration authorities, as well as Landinfo's own interviews conducted on fact-finding missions in 2016.

Access to reliable sources regarding conditions in Iran is a challenge. Because the Iranian government largely limits opportunities for foreign media and other observers to freely obtain information within the country, there is a general lack of independent sources. Also, 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.

Several of the key sources used in this report are Christian organisations that are themselves active in Iran and in Iranian exile communities. Hence, these cannot be considered independent sources. For example, this applies to Elam Ministries and Open Doors. However, through their work among Iranian converts, these organisations have a close proximity to affected individuals and organisations, and thereby possess important and unique first-hand information.

The lack of independent sources has two important implications. First, it is often difficult to verify information and statements conveyed by involved actors by consulting other sources. Second, it also means that news agencies and human rights organisations deal with the same problematic source situation as Landinfo, which means that they largely base their reports on the same Christian sources. Therefore, it must be kept in mind that information that seems to be confirmed by multiple sources may prove to originate from a single primary source.

In some reports, Iranian refugees and asylum seekers form an important part of the source material. While these respondents may possess valuable first-hand information, it is also clear that people in the process of seeking asylum may have a self-interest in which information is being conveyed. This may in turn affect their statements.

The presentation in this report does not claim to be complete or exhaustive, but seeks to present some key and relevant aspects related to the prosecution of converts in Iran. To the extent possible, Landinfo has tried to describe the profiles of some of the

² For a broader presentation of various estimates of the number of converts in Iran, see Landinfo 2017, Chapter 2.5. "Number of converts".

converts who have come into the government's spotlight and experienced some form of reaction.

Again, it must be noted that the source material is often limited. It is a general feature of the reports published by both human rights organisations and Christian actors that more emphasis is placed on describing how the arrestees and prisoners were treated by the authorities than on which activities triggered the reaction. Such information about abuse, mistreatment, and lack of legal justice is usually conveyed through lawyers, networks or the family of the arrestees. To the degree that there is information about the content of the accusations, indictments or convictions, the information is often subject to considerable uncertainty. Among other things, it can be mentioned that the Revolutionary Courts, which handle most of the conversion cases, do not provide copies of rulings. The ruling may be disclosed for review in the court or be pronounced orally. This means that the content can easily be conveyed differently by different sources.

In general, the content of the accusations, indictments or sentences does not necessarily give a precise or accurate description of the actual activities of the accused/indicted. Often the counts of the indictment are vague, such as "propaganda against the regime" or "acting against national security", and are thus not suitable for explaining which activity triggered the prosecution. In addition, false accusations and false confessions may occur (IHRDC 2015), which reduces the value of the rulings as source material. With these reservations, we will nevertheless use the conviction rulings as an indication of what types of activities the government claims the converts have committed. Viewed in the context of what the other sources say about the activity, in some cases the rulings may help shed light on the convict's activity profile.

2. THREE PHASES OF GOVERNMENT PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS AFTER THE 1979 REVOLUTION

The author Mark Bradley (2014) has described the conditions for "Iran's new Christians" in-depth, and is a key source in this report. He has interviewed leaders of five house churches, and presents a unique insight into how the house churches were established and have operated in Iran in the book *Too Many to Jail*. The book also presents a chronological overview of the arrests and litigation against Christian converts and ministers during the period from 2009 to 2014.

Bradley has identified three phases of government actions against Christian activists after the revolution. In the first phase, the revolutionary atmosphere particularly struck the Anglican church, which was considered a symbol of British imperialism. During phase two, from the late 1980s, it was the Pentecostal Assembly of God, and also the Presbyterians and Catholics, who were particularly affected. In the last phase, from around 2008 up to today, it is the house churches that have been the focus of government campaigns against Christian converts.

2.1 PHASE 1: THE ANGLICAN CHURCH

The leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, contributed to creating a threatening atmosphere towards Christian converts by referring to missionaries as “agents of imperialism”, corrupting the youth. The statement referred to Christian “propaganda centres” in Tehran, which he thought it was a duty to destroy.

This rhetoric particularly affected the Anglican church, which had conducted missionary activities and humanitarian work in Iran since the 1870s. In the wake of Khomeini’s speeches, Anglican hospitals and schools were taken over by the regime and their leaders were subjected to violence. There were also killings and arrests. Among other things, pastor Sayyah Arastoo was found stabbed to death in February 1979, and the son of Bishop Bahram Dehqani was shot (Bradley 2014, p. 167, 238).

The Anglican Church continued its activities despite the attacks. According to Elam Ministries, today only the Anglican Church has been able to hold public worship services in Persian (in Tehran, Isfahan and Shiraz), as opposed to other convert churches, which have had to shut down. However, the Anglican Church has been kept under strict surveillance, which has led to shrinking congregations (Bradley 2014, p. 167; Elam Ministries, e-mail September 2017).

2.2 PHASE 2: ASSEMBLY OF GOD, PRESBYTERIANS AND CATHOLICS

The churches of the Assembly of God (AoG, *Jama’at-e-Rabbani* in Persian) were established in the 1960s as part of the Pentecostal movement, and basically consisted of charismatic-oriented³ Armenians and Assyrians who wanted to do missionary work. AoG conducted active evangelism in the 1980s, and eventually succeeded in getting followers amongst former Muslims in several of the major cities (Bradley 2014, p. 168).

From 1985, the authorities repeatedly demanded that AoG stop all activities aimed at converting Muslims. When the church leaders refused to comply with the demands, many of them were subjected to violence. The pastor in Mashhad, the convert Hossein Soodmand, was, after repeated arrests, hung in prison on 3 November 1990. His colleague Mehdi Dibaj, who was sentenced to death for apostasy in 1986, but released in January 1994 following international pressure, was found dead from unknown perpetrators five months after his release. Another AoG pastor, Haik Hovsepian Mehr, who had opposed the requirement to provide lists of names of church members to the authorities, disappeared and was found dead in January 1994 (Bradley 2014, p. 168-173).

The Presbyterian Church was also affected by the lethal attacks. An ethnic Armenian pastor in the Presbyterian Church, Tateos Michaelian, was kidnapped and found murdered on 2 July 1994 (Bradley 2014, p. 173).

³ Charismatic refers to the Christian tradition that originated in the United States in the 1960s, which is characterised by an experience of the Holy Ghost, practising gifts of grace such as speaking in tongues and healing through prayer (Engelsviken 2014).

The Catholic Church, which has a tradition of operating exclusively among Christians in Iran, has generally had good relations with Iranian authorities. But in 2010, a Catholic theological centre, St. John's Institute, which disseminated information about Christianity in Persian, was forced to close and the leader was exiled. At the same time, Persian-speakers were denied access to the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Tehran (Bradley 2014, p. 179).

2.2.1 Closure of churches

The convert churches experienced harassment, surveillance and harsh restrictions on activities after the Revolution. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Assembly of God was subjected to increasing pressure to stop missionary activities among Muslims. They were required to submit lists of members, stop holding sermons in Persian and were not allowed to accept new members. The ban on Persian was key, as most of the converts were Persian-speakers (Bradley 2014, p. 171).

The Assembly of God's churches were closed in several cities: the church in Sari was closed in 1988, the churches in Kerman and Shiraz in 1992 and the church in Gorgan in 1993. The church in Ahvaz was closed in December 2011, and in May 2012, the church in Jannat Abad in Western Tehran was forced to close (Bradley 2014, p. 171-179). The latter was threatened that if they did not close themselves, the authorities would both close the church and confiscate the church building (CHRI 2012). In the end, the oldest Persian-language church in Iran, namely the Central Assembly of God in Tehran, closed in May 2013 after pressure, threats and harassment from the intelligence service (CHRI 2013).

Also after the election of President Hassan Rouhani, who was considered moderate compared to his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, the pressure on Christian converts has continued. At least two Protestant churches in Tehran are reported to have been closed after Rouhani came to power in 2013 (Christians in Parliament 2015, p. 6).

After the government's systematic closure of Persian-speaking churches, they have followed up by ensuring that Christian converts and other Persian-speakers – e.g. people who are interested in Christianity, but have not converted – do not have access to the legal, registered churches that still exist. Mohabat News reported in January 2017 that Persian-speaking Christian converts and non-Christians were denied access to attending Christmas sermons in registered churches (Mohabat News 2017a).

For more information about the convert churches, see part 1, chapter 2.2 of the report (Landinfo 2017).

2.3 PHASE 3: HOUSE CHURCHES

The house church movement has gradually grown as a result of increased pressure against the registered churches from the Iranian government (DIS 2014, p. 35). In 2010 and 2011, several of the country's top leaders came out publicly with harsh criticism of the house churches and missionary Christian community, who were accused of being behind a "cultural invasion" with support from Iran's enemies abroad. The verbal attacks were promoted by, among others, Iran's top leader Ayatollah Ali

Khamenei and then-president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, and appeared as a clear signal to the country's security forces to step up the arrests of Christians (Bradley 2014, p. 186, 197; Open Doors 2011). In the wake of these statements, extensive house raids and arrests were directed at house churches, and the authorities' interest in the house church community has continued up until today.

Another indication that the authorities were directing increased attention to the house churches was that in 2012 the Revolutionary Guard was given a more prominent role in overseeing the Christian churches in the country. This responsibility had previously been with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Intelligence (CHRI 2012).⁴

3. PROSECUTION

When the authorities reveal a house church or other activity among Christian converts, they may take measures such as surveillance, arrests and possibly also criminal prosecution of those involved (Finnish Immigration Service 2015, p. 4-6).

3.1 APPLICATION OF LAW

Conversion, missionary work among Muslims, and organised Christian activities outside the legal, registered churches can fall under various provisions of the Iranian Penal Code and the Iranian interpretation of Sharia (Islamic law).

Christian converts who are prosecuted are often charged with security-related crimes rather than religious activities. The authorities consider Christian missionary work to be driven by hostile forces abroad who want to weaken the Islamic governance system. The house church movement is thus treated more like political opposition hostile to the regime, rather than a religious group (ICHRI 2013, p. 49).

3.1.1 National security and propaganda

Christian converts are usually accused of having committed acts against the nation's security or of having engaged in propaganda against the state. House churches are not mentioned in the law, but are treated as illegal organisations by the authorities, because they operate without official permission (UNSR 2016, p. 17).

The law distinguishes between members and leaders of illegal organisations. Paragraph 498 of the Iranian Penal Code (Book 5) prescribes imprisonment from 2 to 10 years for anyone who establishes or leads an organisation or group whose purpose is to interfere with or damage Iran's security. Those who are members of such

⁴ Bradley (2014, p. 179) refers to a source in Elam Ministries who claimed that responsibility for overseeing the churches had already changed to the Revolutionary Guard in 2009.

organisations shall be sentenced to from 3 months to 5 years in prison, according to paragraph 499 (Penal Code 1996/2013,⁵ Book 5).

Furthermore, paragraph 500 prescribes a prison sentence from 3 months to 1 year for anyone who engages in propaganda against the Islamic Republic or for the benefit of groups who oppose the system. Proliferation of material defined as harmful to public morality is prohibited in accordance with paragraph 640 and punishable by fines, lashes and/or imprisonment from 3 months to 1 year (Penal Code 1996/2013, Book 5).

It also happens that converts are accused of contact with organisations abroad, delivering information to foreign media or conspiracy with foreign powers. Cooperation with foreign states against the Islamic Republic is punishable by 2 to 10 years in prison in accordance with paragraph 508 of the Penal Code (Penal Code 1996/2013, Book 5).

For more about this topic, see part 1, chapter 4.2 of the report, Government policy – Apostasy and National Security (Landinfo 2017).

3.1.2 Apostasy

According to Iran's interpretation of Sharia, apostasy – abandoning Islam – is forbidden and must be punished by death. Apostasy is not mentioned in the Iranian Penal Code, but paragraph 167 of the Constitution stipulates that in cases where a condition is not covered by the codified law, the judge shall apply traditional Islamic law. The founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini (died 1989), also argued for the death penalty for apostasy in his legal deliberations (Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Tahrir Al-Wasilah*). These interpretations have status as a source of law in Iran (ICHRI 2013, p. 30).

However, it is extremely rare that formal accusations for apostasy have been raised against converts. In cases when accusations of apostasy have been raised, it has sparked massive international criticism and thus posed a challenge for Iranian authorities. The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran has established that there are three documented cases since 1979 where Christians have been charged with apostasy. The cases in question were Hossein Soodmand (executed in prison in 1990), Mehdi Dibaj (killed after release in 1994) and Yousef Naderkhani (death sentence converted to prison sentence 2012) (ICHRI 2013, p. 31; IHRDC 2014b, p. 29-35).

Although the authorities seem to have set aside the use of accusations of apostasy in practice, it has repeatedly been reported that threats of accusations of apostasy have been used in the interrogation of converts, as one of many ways to pressure the accused to cooperate. Among the cases presented in Bradley's book, there are several cases where converts have been threatened with accusations of apostasy, or where apostasy

⁵ Iran's 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 (paragraph 498-729) 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 in the old law for paragraphs over 498, and that it must be referred to the relevant book in addition to the paragraph (IHRDC 2013; 2014a).

has been raised as an accusation during preliminary hearings, without having been included in the final indictment (see, for example, Bradley 2014, p. 265).

3.1.3 Blasphemy

Blasphemy is mentioned in the new Penal Code from 2013 in paragraph 262, which prescribes the death penalty for “insulting the Prophet Muhammad or one of the other prophets” (Penal Code 2013). However, paragraph 513 in book 5 the old penal code, which still applies, prescribes the death penalty or prison from 1 to 5 years for “insulting Islam’s sacred values or great prophets” (Penal Code 1996/2013, Book 5). A recent case of a sentence where blasphemy was one of several accusations was the case against the convert Amin Afshar Naderi, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison in July 2017 (see Chapter 3.4.1). Allegedly, the ruling has been appealed (HRWF 2017, p. 6).

3.1.4 Alcohol

In accordance with paragraph 264 of the penal code, the penalty for consuming alcohol is 80 lashes. Paragraph 266 states that there are exceptions for Christians, who will only be punished if they use alcohol in public (Penal Code 2013). But because converts are not recognised as Christians by the Iranian authorities, they do not have the same rights as registered members of legal church congregations. Thus, the ban on alcohol for converts applies, and convictions have occurred (U.S. Department of State 2017, p. 5).

3.2 DIFFERENT COURTS

The Iranian court system has several special courts which try special types of cases (Landinfo 2011). While ordinary criminal cases are tried in the ordinary courts, cases with accusations of activities hostile to the regime, acts threatening the nation’s security, armed insurgency and political opposition are tried by the Revolutionary Courts. This means that cases relating to house church activities, which are linked to political activities hostile to the regime, are also tried in these courts (ICHRI 2013, p. 49-50).

This has consequences for the criminal process, because an arrestee has weaker legal certainty in the Revolutionary Court than in the ordinary courts. Among other things, it is common for arrestees to be subjected to long-term detention and be denied access to an attorney (ICHRI 2013, p. 51; Amnesty International 2012, p. 23, Christians in Parliament 2015, p. 8-12).

Criminal cases involving alcohol use, apostasy or blasphemy should be tried by the ordinary criminal courts (UNSR 2014a). If a person is accused of several matters that fall under different courts, cases may be tried separately in each of the courts (Iranian lawyer in exile, email June 2017).

3.3 NUMBER OF ARRESTS

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF 2017) writes in its annual report for 2016 that 600 Christians have been arrested in Iran from 2010 until the end of 2016. According to USCIRF, nearly 80 Christians were arrested

between May and August 2016. Most were released within a few days, while some were detained without charge for several months, and some remained imprisoned even longer. The same source states that about 90 Christians were imprisoned, arrested or were awaiting trial as of December 2016 (USCIRF 2017). The Christian organisation World Watch Monitor (WWM, n.d.) states that 193 Christians were arrested or imprisoned in 2016. Amnesty International (2017) states that “tens” of Christian converts were arrested after raids against house churches in 2016.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, the number of converts who at any time have been imprisoned has varied from a few dozens to around 100 people in recent years. There was a significant increase in the number of arrests of converts from 2010, and the Special Rapporteur reported that 300 were arrested from June 2010 to September 2012. 41 of these were imprisoned for a period of one month or more. In the Special Rapporteur’s various reports, the number of Christian prisoners was reported to be 20 as of July 2013 (UNSR 2013, p. 12), 49 as of January 2014 (UNSR 2014b, p. 12), 92 as of January 2015 (UNSR 2015a, p. 14), while the number is quoted as “dozens” as of January 2016 (UNSR 2016, p. 17). The report from March 2017 does not mention the number of Christians in prison (UNSR 2017).

The Iranian-born pastor Mansour Borji leads the Christian organisation Article 18, which publishes information about arrests. Borji (as cited in ICHRI 2013, p. 41) claims that the number of arrests is underreported, and that the arrestees are often threatened by the authorities to remain silent about information related to their arrest. Article 18 respects their wishes and therefore refrains from reporting on some of the cases.

3.4 INFORMATION ABOUT ARRESTEES AND/OR CONVICTED CONVERTS

Several organisations have published lists of prisoners in Iran, and some of them focus specifically on Christian prisoners.

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF 2017) has published the “Freedom of Religion or Belief & Blasphemy Prisoners Database”, which lists people imprisoned for their faith in a number of countries. Under the Iran chapter, which was updated 18 September 2017, 16 Christian prisoners are listed, of which 12 are Iranian citizens.

- The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC 2016) has a list of 820 named prisoners in Iran, of which 25 are listed as “Christian Converts”. The list was last updated in March 2016.
- Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW 2017d) has an overview of nine profiled Iranians who have been imprisoned.
- Open Doors (2017, p. 10-17) has a list of 56 arrested Christians.
- Elam Ministries (2016) has published a list of seven named Christian prisoners who are serving sentences, as well as 22 released prisoners. The website states that the list was updated in January 2016.
- Global Freedom Movement (n.d.) runs an open database where human rights activists can enter information individually. The base has 190 entries under the category “Christian” that contain both current and former prisoners.

These lists contain brief information about the arrestees and/or convicted converts. However, the information is often too inadequate to clarify which activity constituted the reason for the arrests. Several of the lists have links to sources that may contain relevant information, but, as mentioned earlier, the source material often focuses more on the treatment during the arrest and imprisonment than what led to the arrest in the first place. Nevertheless, the lists can be a starting point for further searches of named prisoners, which can lead to more detailed information.

Below, we present a series of cases that appear in the prisoner lists of Human Rights Without Frontiers and Elam Ministries.⁶ We have chosen to focus on the first list, because it was updated relatively recently (18 September 2017), and the latter because Elam Ministries is a widely used source. Elam's list also contains some information about whether the named prisoners were leaders or members of the house churches.

The selection of cases is not necessarily representative of the total case complex, but will help illuminate the significance the converts' background and level of activity may have on any legal reactions.

3.4.1 Cases reported by Human Rights Without Frontiers

The following Iranian cases are mentioned in Human Rights Without Frontiers' list as of September 2017.

Hadi Asgari, Amin Afshar Naderi, Ramil Bet-Tamraz, Amir Saman Dashti and Mohammad Dehnavi were among a group of 17 Christians, most converts, who were arrested during a picnic on 26 August 2016 in a private garden in Firouzkouh, north of Tehran. The five named here were brought to the Evin prison in Tehran and placed in custody (Mohabat News 2017e). Three of the five, Amir Saman Dashti, Ramil Bet-Tamraz and Mohammad Dehnavi, were released in October/November 2016 against a bail of around 33,000 USD each. The last two, Hadi Asgari and Amin Afshar Naderi, remained imprisoned, allegedly because they could not obtain the bail amount. Asgari and Naderi were members of a house church led by the Assyrian pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz. The lawsuit against Asgari Naderi and Beth-Tamraz, as well as a fourth member, Kaviyan Fallah-Mohammadi, was held in June 2017. Naderi was sentenced to 15 years in prison, while Asgari, Bet-Tamraz and Fallah-Mohammadi were sentenced to 10 years each in prison (MEC 2017a; WWM 2017a).

Prison sentences of 10 and 15 years are unusual, even by Iranian standards. The rulings were appealed and are thus not legally binding. The appeal may take up to two years (WWM 2017a).

The status of each of the five cases is as follows, based on information Landinfo has found:

Hadi Asgari was sentenced to 10 years in prison on 4 July 2017 by the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, and was issued a two-year travel ban after having served the sentence. He was accused of acts against national security and organisation and establishment of house churches. The judgment assumes that Asgari has had a leading role in the

⁶ People who are mentioned in both lists are only shown once.

house church. Asgari is referred to as a leader by Elam Ministries (Elam Ministries 2017; Hoezee 2017).

Amin Afshar Naderi was sentenced to 15 years in prison and a 2-year travel ban by the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on 4 July 2017. He was accused of actions against national security and organisation and establishment of house churches, as well as blasphemy. While awaiting appeal, after having started a hunger strike in July 2017, he was released on bail of 80,000 USD. According to Mohabat News (2017e), 5 years of the sentence was on account of blasphemy. Naderi had been brought in earlier. In December 2014, he was arrested in a house church in which, according to the authorities, illegal printing and distribution of Bibles took place (Hoezee 2017; CHRI 2017a). Elam Ministries (2017) describes Naderi as a leader.

Ramil Bet-Tamraz is not a convert, but an Assyrian and the son of the Assyrian pastor and house church leader Victor Bet-Tamraz, who is mentioned above. Ramil Bet-Tamraz was released on bail and is allegedly accused of acts against national security and organisation and establishment of house churches. Ramil Bet-Tamraz was also arrested briefly once before, in December 2014, as a participant in the house church that was run by his father. After the last arrest in August 2016, he was placed in custody until he was released on bail in October 2016, pending further legal process (Church in Chains 2017; WWM 2016).

Amir Saman Dashti was accused of “having a non-Islamic party” and for possession of Bibles and Christian material (HRWF 2017, p. 3). Landinfo is unaware of reports on further criminal proceedings in this case, but as Dashti was released on bail, it normally means that the case was not concluded at the time of release.

Mohammad Dehnavi was released on bail in October 2016 (Mohabat News 2016). There is no information about further legal proceedings. Neither has Landinfo found any information about the background and activity in English-language sources. Dehnavi is not listed with a profile in HRWF’s list of prisoners, but is only mentioned in connection with the others in the group he was arrested with. He was added to the Open Doors’ prisoner list from September 2017 (here spelled Mohamad Denay), but there is no information other than that he was arrested in Firouzkouh Park in August 2016 and released on bail. None of the sources refer to any separate charges against Dehnavi, and he thus appears to be an example of an arrested convert without a known profile. Because sources hardly mention him, it indicates that he had less visible activity. Landinfo has not found information about whether the case has been concluded or not.

Pastor Yousef Naderkhani, Mohammadreza Omidi, Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie were arrested during a series of raids on house church members in Rasht on 13 May 2016. Prior to the raids, house owners were called by phone for questioning by the intelligence service. The security forces seized phones, computers and Bibles in their homes. Naderkhani was released the same day, while the three others were detained for 2-3 weeks before being released on bail of around 33,000 USD each (CSW 2016b; 2016f).

In July 2017, all four were sentenced to 10 years in prison each. According to the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI 2017c), they were accused of participating in

a conspiracy against national security and for the organisation of house churches. The ruling referred to paragraph 498 of the Penal Code, Book 5, which deals with people who establish or lead a group that seeks to harm the nation's security (CHRI 2017b). The judge also accused the house church of having received 500,000 British pounds annually from the British government (CSW 2017b).

Naderkhani and Omid were also sentenced to 2 years of internal exile, which will be served in the inhospitable southern Iran. In a separate trial in October 2016, Omid, Mossayebzadeh and Fadaie were sentenced to 80 lashes for drinking alcohol during communion in Naderkhani's house church, of which all three are members (Caballero 2017).

Yousef Naderkhani became known internationally when the Iranian Supreme Court confirmed a death sentence against him for apostasy in 2011, a ruling that was converted to 3 years in prison for illegal missionary work after intervention by the Supreme Leader of Iran. Naderkhani has continued his role as leader of the house church community in Rasht after release. The three other church members who were arrested together with him are not particularly well-known names, and little has been written about them in English-language media. Therefore, it is unclear which type of activity and what type of roles they have had in Naderkhani's house church. However, a CSW news report (2016a) states that all three men were briefly arrested during a similar raid in February 2015. Omid was imprisoned the first time during a raid against the house churches in December 2012. In 2013, he was one of four Christians who were sentenced to 80 lashes for drinking alcohol during communion (CSW 2016d).

Nasser Navard Goltape is a 23-year-old Iranian convert who was arrested on 24 June 2016 together with four converts from the neighbouring country Azerbaijan. The five were arrested during a reception at the home of a Christian friend in a suburb of Karaj. Goltape was released on bail in October 2016, and sentenced to 10 years in prison by a revolutionary court on 23 May 2017. The court accused Goltape of being a Christian Zionist "acting against national security" by trying to "overthrow the state". The sentence was based on paragraph 498 of the Iranian Penal Code, Book 5 (HRWF 2017, p. 1; CHRI 2017b). Goltape appealed, but lost in the court of appeal, who confirmed the sentence of 10 years in prison on 12 November 2017 (WWM 2017c, 24 November). The accusations indicate that the authorities consider Goltape to be a leading person who has also had contact with actors abroad.

Pastor Vruir Avnessian is a 61-year-old Armenian pastor in the Assembly of God. He was arrested on 27 December 2012 during a raid on a Christmas sermon in a house church in Tehran, where about 50 newly converted Christians were gathered. The converts were interrogated on the spot and had to fill out forms that contained personal questions about their conversion. Mobile phones were confiscated and they were required to give information about user accounts and passwords for personal emails, Facebook and other social media. Whereas the converts were released after a few hours, Avnessian was detained. He was released on bail after two weeks pending trial. Avnessian was charged with acts against national security and proselytising to Persian-speaking Iranians. Behind closed doors, he was sentenced to 3.5 years in

prison by the Revolutionary Court in Tehran in December 2013 (HRWF 2017, p. 3; Bradley 2014, p. 270; Ireland 2013).

Anousheh Reza-Bakhsh and Soheil Zagarzadeh Sani are a mother and son from Urmia, who were arrested in Urmia on 20 February 2017. It is unclear what they are accused of. The two were arrested at home by security forces from the Revolutionary Guard and taken to an unknown place. Eyewitnesses explained that the security police entered their home and confiscated Bibles and Christian books. The two, who had never been arrested before, had converted to the Catholic Church (Mohabat News 2017b).

Middle East Concern reported that the mother and son were baptised in Istanbul in August 2016, and then returned to Iran where they continued to read and learn about the Christian faith. The son was allegedly an avid viewer of Christian programmes with theological education on satellite television (HRWF 2017, p. 2; MEC 2017b). It was reported that their fate was still uncertain 3.5 months after the arrest (Mohabat News 2017d).

3.4.2 Cases reported by Elam Ministries

Elam Ministries' list of prisoners contains 7 people who are serving prison sentences and 22 named persons who have recently been released, either because they have served their sentences, or because they were released temporarily on bail awaiting further trial. The list is dated January 2016 and is therefore not fully updated. The list categorises most people as "leader/pastor" or "member" in house churches (Elam Ministries 2016).

Among the seven prisoners, two are referred to as leaders, namely Behnam Irani and Vruir Avanesian. They are both internationally known for their work in the house church community in Karaj and Tehran, respectively, which have repeatedly attracted the attention of the authorities with their activities. Irani was sentenced to 6 years in prison in 2011 for acts against the nation's security and was released in October 2016 after having served his sentence (CSW 2016e). Avanesian, who is an ordained pastor of Armenian origin, was sentenced to 3.5 years in prison for missionary work (for more about Avanesian's activity and conviction, see chapter 3.4.1).

The other five on Elam's list of prisoners who are serving sentences are referred to as "members". They have the following prison sentences: Maryam (Nasim) Naghash Zargaran: 4 years; Ebrahim Firouzi: 1 year plus 2 years in internal exile (serving in a remote city); Shahin Lahooti: 2.5 years; Mohammad Roghangir: 6 years; Massoud Rezai: 5 years.

Because the list contains little information about the converts' roles and activities, Landinfo has consulted other sources to get a better picture of their activity profile.

Maryam (Nasim) Naghash Zargaran is a 39-year-old convert and music teacher arrested in November 2012, and was accused of intention to buy property for a Christian orphanage in collaboration with the well-known Iranian-American pastor Saeed Abedini. Abedini is also a convert and was imprisoned and sentenced to 8 years in prison in 2013. Zargaran was sentenced to 4 years in prison by the Revolutionary Court for "assembly and collusion against national security" (CHRI 2017d).

According to the ruling, which Mohabat News (quoted in Reynolds 2013) reportedly received a copy of, Zargarani was accused of having started a house church to convert Muslim youth. She allegedly took 20 women on a trip to the Caspian Sea to do missionary work, and also travelled to Turkey in connection with missionary activities. The ruling also assumed that Zargarani had at one point signed a statement promising not to cooperate with the Assembly of God, while allegedly maintaining contact with the church. The ruling refers to paragraphs 46 and 610 of the Penal Code as basis for the sentence (Reynolds 2013).

Ebrahim Firouzi is a 28-year-old man from Robat-Karim. Firouzi was called in for questioning and arrested in January 2011, accused of missionary work, apostasy and contact with foreign organisations. His hearing took place in April the same year, but he was probably not convicted. He was released in August 2011 (Bradley 2014, p. 260).

The charges were resumed after Firouzi was arrested again in March 2013. In addition, he was accused of having made a Christian website, having had contact with “anti-Islamic agents abroad”, having conducted an online church sermon and of promoting Christian Zionism. On 15 July 2013, he was sentenced to 1 year in prison and 2 years of internal exile, pursuant to paragraphs 498, 499 and 500 of the Penal Code. While he served the sentence, a new criminal case was brought against him (Mohabat News 2015a). Instead of being released at the end of sentence, he was sentenced to 5 more years in prison. The verdict was confirmed by the court of appeals in Tehran on 15 January 2017 (HRWF 2017, p. 4; Mohabat News 2017c).

Shahin Lahooti, Mohammad Roghangir and Massoud Rezai are three male prisoners featured on Elam’s list as members of a group of a total of eight people affiliated with the Church of Iran in Shiraz. They were arrested in Shiraz in October 2012 and sentenced in July 2013. During the appeal proceedings in March 2014, seven of the sentences were upheld. The three named persons are the ones serving in prison as of January 2016. According to Elam Ministries’ list (2016), Shahin Lahooti was sentenced to 2.5 years in prison, Mohammad Roghangir to 6 years in prison and Massoud Rezai to 5 years in prison.

The activities of and the litigation against the three is discussed in several sources, which can shed light on the reason for the sentences. The entire group was arrested when security forces conducted a raid against one of the Church of Iran’s house churches in Shiraz. The group was accused of acts against national security and propaganda, including online activity against the regime. Roghangir is referred to by the Middle East Concern as “a local church leader”, and it was he who led the church service when the house church was stormed by security forces. He also got the strictest sentence, 6 years in prison (HRWF 2017, p. 6; MEC 2016; CSW 2013).

The other five members of the group were sentenced to 1 year (two people), 2.5 years (one person) and 3 years (two people) (Bradley 2014, p. 284).

On a separate list of released prisoners, Elam Ministries has listed 23 names, of which 5 are categorised as leaders/pastors, and 18 are listed as members of house churches or are left uncategorised. These are people who have either served a sentence or were temporarily released on bail (Elam Ministries 2016).

According to other sources, some of the people on the list have been arrested several times. This applies to Maysam Hojati and Amin Khaki.

Maysam Hojati was arrested on 23 December 2015 in Isfahan, according to Elam's list, and then released on bail 6 January 2016. According to the database of Global Freedom Movement (n.d.), Hojati was also arrested with other Christians on 22 February 2012 and released on bail on 1 May 2012. Mohabat News (2015c) has also reported that Hojati was imprisoned for two months and released on bail in 2012.

Amin Khaki is another on Elam's list of released prisoners belonging to Behnam Irani's house church in Karaj. He is listed as having been arrested on 5 March 2014 and released on bail 3 January 2015. The British organisation Release International refers to the same arrest, but states that Khaki, who is referred to as "deacon", was also arrested in May 2010 and given a suspended sentence for activities hostile to the regime. His home was also subjected to a search and seizure in December 2013, where computer equipment was confiscated (Release International 2014). The information about previous imprisonment, and especially the previous suspended sentence, is relevant in this context, because people with such a background will probably be subject to harsher reactions if taken in for a new activity.

People who are convicted of contact with foreign congregations, regularly receive stricter sentences. Of the released people on Elam's list, this applies to Vahid Hakkani, Mojtaba Seyyed-Alaedin Hossein, Esmail (Homayoun) Shokouhi and Mohammad-Reza (Kourosh) Partoei. Everyone received a 3-year prison sentence and 8 months (Release International 2013).

Silas Rabbani, affiliated with the Church of Iran in Karaj, was sentenced to 6 years in prison in September 2014. After international pressure, he was acquitted by appeal in December of the same year and then released. On Elam's list, Rabbani is listed as a member of a house church, while several other sources refer to him as pastor or leader, including the Norwegian Stefanus Alliance (2015; Present Truth Ministries 2014).

Alireza Seyyedian is a convert, who according to Elam's list was sentenced to 6 years in prison in November 2011. He was sentenced for engaging in propaganda against the regime and for acts against the nation's security after having been baptised in Turkey. Then he spoke in several interviews and published videos of baptisms on the Internet. He was charged with running a house church, which the Center for Human Rights in Iran also claims he did (CHRI 2011).

A group of eight house church members associated with the Church of Iran were arrested in Karaj on 7 August 2015. Four of them are listed with full names on Elam's list: Esmayeel Fallahi, Nematollah Yousefi, Shahin Bashiri and Mona Chardooli. Elam states that the arrestees were released on bail at an unknown date. Landinfo has not found any information in other media besides reports of circumstances surrounding the arrests, where several persons were beaten, and where property was confiscated by officials from the intelligence service (Church in Chains 2015).

Hossein (Estifan) Saketi Aramsari⁷ was allegedly sentenced to 1 year imprisonment for Christian missionary work by the Revolutionary Court in Karaj in January 2014. The name has been listed on several prisoner lists, but Landinfo has not found further information about his activities (WWM 2014; Bradley 2014, p. 272).

3.5 PATTERNS OF STATE REACTIONS

There is not sufficient basis for drawing far-reaching conclusions based on the examples mentioned above. The lack of information about which activities have actually been carried out by the imprisoned converts makes it difficult to establish whether members who have not had any outward activities, may have been subjected to long-term prison sentences or other reactions. Landinfo will nevertheless highlight some aspects of the cases presented in 3.4.1 and 3.4.2, which can shed light on the government's priorities.

All the converts convicted in the examples above were convicted of an activity, not the conversion itself. Furthermore, leaders and people with a prominent role, or who were accused by the government of having such a role, have received the most severe punishments. Among the cases referred to above, there are eight people who, in the summer of 2017, were sentenced to 10 years in prison each. Seven of these were accused of the establishment or organisation of house churches, and one for missionary work and organisation of visits of Christian converts from abroad.

In two of the cases in which larger groups of people were arrested, most were released after having been interrogated, while some were held in custody. People who were convicted in the cases in question had either been arrested or convicted earlier, exhibited some form of outward activity, had an active role in the organisation, had contact with people abroad, published on the Internet or been interviewed about their faith, or been accused of such acts. As explained in the introduction, reservations apply as to whether the authorities construct false accusations. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that those who received the longest prison sentences were convicted on charges of more extensive activity than just membership in a house church.

In some cases, Christian sources have confirmed that an arrestee has had an organisational responsibility, for example, by being referred to as a pastor or leader. In the selected examples, there have been some cases where the person was categorised only as a "member" in published prisoner lists, but referred to as a leader or pastor in other source material.

Furthermore, we see that for several of the longest punishments, there have been previous dealings with the authorities in the form of arrests and/or earlier convictions. It appears to be a clear aggravating circumstance to be taken in for repeated offenses, especially if you have previously signed a guarantee of abstaining from further Christian activity, which has often been the case (see chapter 3.5.1).

⁷ Hossein (Estifan) Saketi Aramsari was listed on a previous version of Elam's list of prisoners serving. The list was marked as updated in August 2015, but this version is no longer available on the site. The following information was listed about Aramsari: "arrested on 23 July 2013 in Golestan province. Serving a one-year sentence in Ghezel Hesar prison (Karaj)" (Elam Ministries 2015).

It must be emphasised that in some cases, Landinfo know very little about the profile and activity of an arrested or convicted convert. Oftentimes, there is less available information about the activity in the cases which receive milder reactions and relatively short penalties. This has been true for several cases where arrestees were held in custody for a short period and then released. In one of the cases referred to above, there was a person who was sentenced to 1 year in prison where Landinfo did not find information about the person's prior activity.

The pattern of the authorities' reactions and priorities described are largely in accordance with the picture presented by several other observers. Mark Bradley presents a list of 116 arrests and detention sentences in the book *Too Many to Jail*, and 28 cases of prison sentences that have affected Christians during the period from 2009 to 2014. In Landinfo's assessment, the list does not contain enough systematic information about activities to draw any quantitative conclusions. However, there are many examples mentioned that when arresting larger groups, it is common for most people to be released after a short time, while those who are considered to have a leading or coordinating role are detained and possibly prosecuted. This has been the case with mass arrests that have been made during Christmas celebrations for several years. A typical example is the security force's action against a house church in December 2009 in Karaj, where 70 Christians were arrested during a Christmas celebration. They were released on bail after questioning, but two of the leaders in the group were imprisoned. The same Christmas, 12 persons were arrested in Pakdasht. These were held somewhat longer. Nine were released on 4 January 2010, and three were held for 80 days before they were released on 18 March the same year (Bradley 2014, p. 250).

Bradley (2014, p. 34) is clear in his assessment that the authorities are concentrating on the organisers: "The Christians arrested were active in their faith; they were the pastors and teachers responsible for others."

The authorities have declared their goal of preventing growth among the house churches, thus seeking primarily to affect the leaders, precisely whose task it is to ensure growth by establishing new house churches. The authorities' strategy thus appears logical based on the structure of the house churches, as Bradley describes it. His findings indicate that the house churches always have a responsible leader. Because the goal is growth, a leader will always have in the back of their mind that new leaders must be trained to be prepared to take over responsibility when the group has become so large that it must be divided (Bradley 2014, p. 120).

Bradley has also referred to cases where the prisoner is either the host of a meeting in the house church (p. 254, 257), has engaged in outward activities or had contact with congregations or organisations abroad (p. 281, 283-284), has participated in conferences abroad (p. 56), or been involved in money transfers to house churches (p. 280).

Elam Ministries has also pointed out that the authorities' priorities appear to be a matter of resources. The authorities apparently do not use their resources on new believers, because their priority is stopping the establishment of new house churches.

Therefore, they are most interested in striking at the leaders of house churches and networks, according to Elam (as quoted in DIS 2014, p. 27).

Bradley's assessment is shared by several sources. In November 2012, Landinfo, the Danish immigration authorities and the Danish Refugee Council interviewed a foreign source in Tehran who had contact with Christians in the country. This source stated that house church members who were arrested for the first time would normally be released if they signed a statement saying that they would not continue the activities. If they had been arrested before, the consequences could be more serious, said the source (DIS, DRC & Landinfo 2013, p. 29).

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom emphasised in its annual report for 2016 that the leaders of house churches are particularly vulnerable: "Christian leaders of house churches were the particular focus of Iranian authorities, and often were charged with unfounded national-security-related crimes" (USCIRF 2017).

Representatives of Amnesty International emphasised in a meeting with Landinfo in November 2016 that the organisers and leaders of house churches run the greatest risk of being arrested and prosecuted. At the same time, the representatives also pointed out that ordinary members may also be at risk because Iranian authorities are highly unpredictable (meeting in London in November 2016). Amnesty International has previously pointed out that even if the authorities do not go after regular members of house churches, it is likely that they keep many members under surveillance (as quoted in DIS 2014, p. 25).

For more information about this topic, see Part 1, Chapter 4.3.1 of the report; Which converts are the most vulnerable to arrest and prosecution? Here statements from sources Landinfo met on the fact-finding mission in autumn 2016 are referred (Landinfo 2017).

3.5.1 Declaration to end Christian activity

It seems almost a routine that arrested converts are asked to sign a declaration promising to refrain from further Christian activity. Members who have not had a prominent role will normally be released shortly if they agree to sign such a statement. Arrested converts who refuse to sign, however, risk further imprisonment. Bradley (2014, p. 255) mentions an example where a group of eleven converts were arrested during an excursion between Mashhad and Bojnurd. Eight of the arrested were released after one week, while three remained in custody because they refused to sign the declaration of ending Christian activity. If a person who has signed such a declaration is later caught participating in the same activity, it will, as noted above, clearly constitute an aggravating circumstance.

3.5.2 Release on bail

Both in the cases presented in this report and in the other prisoner lists referred to, it seems very common that converts who are arrested are released on bail pending further legal proceedings. Bail is used to ensure that a person is present for future court proceedings. The size of the bail amount varies and can be paid in the form of cash, a

bank guarantee or by mortgaging real estate. Bail is terminated when the case is concluded, i.e. through acquittal or serving a sentence (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2009).

However, it seems bail is often used as a means to force the released person to keep a low profile. Often the bail is maintained even if the case is not followed up with further legal action. Thus, the released person has the threat of possible trial hanging over him. Furthermore, significant values could be tied up, because the bail is often very high – in some cases up to 200,000 USD (ICHRI 2013, p. 43).

3.5.3 Threats and abuse during interrogation and in prison

Threats against arrested converts occur in various forms. It is often reported that during interrogation, investigators threaten what may happen to the suspect or their family if he or she does not confess, provide information about the activity and network, or cooperate in another way. Many Christian prisoners have also been put in isolation for long periods, a method routinely used by the Revolutionary Guard and the Ministry of Intelligence (Bradley 2014, p. 187- 202; Amnesty International 2017).

It is also common for a prisoner or relatives to report that they have been informed of possible consequences if they go public with information about the arrest. One example is Robert Asserian, who was arrested in connection with the fact that the church he was the pastor of, Central Assembly of God in Tehran, was closed in May 2013. After 43 days in prison, Asserian was released on bail. The authorities made it clear to him and his family that a condition of the release was that he did not talk to the media about the imprisonment or the case (Church in Chains 2013).

While threats and other psychological abuse seems to be systematically used against Christian prisoners, there are also cases of physical abuse reported, although on a smaller scale. It is particularly during the interrogation phase that prisoners have reported that they have been subjected to isolation, threats and violence as a means to pressure them to give information or confessions (ICHRI 2013, p. 47-49; Amnesty International 2017; NOAS et al. 2017, p. 46).

3.5.4 Inadequate medical treatment

A number of prisoners have reported inadequate medical treatment while serving in prison. Maryam Naghash Zargaran, who was released after 4 years in prison in August 2017, was long denied adequate medical supervision despite several serious disorders, including heart problems and diabetes. After she started a hunger strike in July 2016, she was granted leave for hospital treatment, but was forced back to prison before the treatment was completed (Amnesty International 2016). Naghash Zargaran claimed after the end of serving her time that she was also subjected to improper medication by being put on strong anti-psychotic drugs (CHRI 2017d).

The convert Shahin Rostami Azar-Kord experienced three heart attacks while she was in custody in the prison in Arak. She was allegedly not given necessary medical attention, and was paralysed on one side of her body (Bradley 2014, p. 256).

According to the family, Saeed Abedini had gastric bleeding that was not treated. Reportedly, pastor Behnam Irani had serious health problems without receiving

adequate medical treatment. Also the convert Vahid Hakkani allegedly had severe bleeding that was not treated properly in prison (Baptist Press 2013).

3.6 UNPREDICTABLE COURT PROCEEDINGS

There are many indications that randomness comes into play when it comes to how converts are dealt with in the court system. The Iranian court system provides the judge with wide discretionary powers. Some judges are known to be extremely strict against converts. For example, most Christians in recent years have been sentenced to between 2 and 5 years in prison (CSW 2017a).

Many of the unusually long prison sentences imposed in the summer of 2017 were signed by Mashallah Ahmadzadeh in the 26th Division of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran. He sentenced at least 16 Christians to between 5 and 10 years in prison (CSW 2017a). One of them received an additional penalty of 5 years for blasphemy, and the sentence thus became a total of 15 years in prison (Mohabat News 2017e).

Other judges seem to be more inclined to acquit, and there are several examples of accused converts being acquitted. Bradley (2014, p. 248-270) mentions a number of examples that converts have been acquitted in the courts. These individual differences leave an impression of significant unpredictability in court proceedings of converts. Cases that are essentially similar may in one case lead to acquittal, and in another to conviction.

The material presented above (chapter 3.4) furthermore shows that there is significant variation in how long prisoners are kept in custody. Also in cases that end with acquittal, there are some who are released pending trial, and others who are in custody for several months before the case comes up. In some cases, the defendant has been offered release at such a high bail that they have not been able to avail themselves of the option. It may also happen that it takes a long time from when an acquittal is announced until the person is released.

An illustrative example is the case against a group of four Christians who were arrested on 4 September 2010 in Hamedan, and who were acquitted in April 2011. The four were imprisoned until the trial because the bail determined for release was unrealistically high. One of the four was the Armenian pastor Vahik Abrahamian, who remained imprisoned for another four months after acquittal. He was not released before August 2011 (Bradley 2014, p. 256; Voice of the Martyrs Canada 2011).

Another occurring form of unpredictability is that some converts have had additional sentences imposed at the end of serving time, and thus must serve a new sentence. This happened to Ebrahim Firouzi, who in March 2015 was sentenced to 5-year imprisonment when he had almost finished serving a 1-year prison sentence and 2 years of internal exile (Open Doors 2017, p. 11). He went on a hunger strike against the prison conditions in the prison in Karaj in July 2017 (Mohabat News 2017c).

3.7 SENTENCES FOR ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

In several cases, house church members have been charged with illegal alcohol use in connection with communion. Christian converts who are sentenced to lashing have on several occasions won an appeal case. For example, a group of eleven Christians who

were arrested on 3 September 2010 in Bandar Anzali, charged among other with consumption of wine, acquitted after trial in April 2011 (Bradley 2014, p. 256).

According to Bradley (2014, p. 276), during the period of 2009-2014 there was only one documented and publicly reported case of implemented corporal punishment of Christians. A court in Rasht sentenced four Christians to 80 lashes on 6 October 2013 for having consumed wine during communion. The verdict of 80 lashes was carried out for two of the men on 30 October 2013 (CSW 2016c). One was Mehdi Reza Omid, who received a new sentence of lashing for the same account three years later. Omid was arrested again with three other members of the Church of Iran in Rasht in May 2016. Omid, Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie were sentenced to 80 lashes each by the court in Rasht on 10 September 2016. The three men, who were also sentenced to 10 years in prison, have appealed the verdict, which thus is not legally binding (CSW 2016d).

4. TRAVEL BANS VERSUS PRESSURE TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY

For many years, Iranian authorities have been using travel bans as a means of sanctions for converts. During a delegation visit to Iran in 2008, Christian Solidarity Worldwide became aware that 40 people who had attended Christian conferences had had their passports confiscated upon returning to Iran (CSW 2008, p. 4).

It also happens that convicted converts have been issued a travel ban for a period after serving their sentence, as was the case with Hadi Asgari, who is mentioned above (chapter 3.4.1). A group of eleven converts who were arrested in Shahin-Shahr and sentenced to a 1-year imprisonment in 2013 were also issued a 2-year travel ban (Mohabat News 2015b; Open Doors 2017, p. 20-22). The convert Maryam Naghsh Zargaran was also issued a travel ban of 6 months in August 2017 after having served a sentence of 4 years in prison for her work with house churches and missionary work (CHRI 2017d).

While some converts are issued travel bans, others are encouraged or pressured to leave the country. A representative of the organisation Article 18 has stated that the authorities fear the influence of Christian converts on society, and therefore they pressure them to leave the country, even after having served sentences (WWM 2017b). Church leaders have said that they have been warned during interrogation that they risk several years of imprisonment if they do not leave the country. The harassment may involve being frequently brought in by the security services, confiscation of ID documents or termination of employment. A group of Christians who went before the court in 2014 were allegedly told by the judge that the court deliberately issued the sentence in order for the defendants to have time to escape from the country (Christians in Parliament 2015, p. 11).

According to the British organisation Middle East Concern (MEC 2016), Mohammed Roghangir, a local house church leader in Shiraz who served a 6-year prison sentence, was subjected to pressure from the intelligence service to leave Iran when he was

released. He himself wants to continue living in Iran. Even Yousef Nadarkhani, the pastor of the Church of Iran, who for two years had a death sentence for apostasy hanging over him before being acquitted in 2012, had the opportunity to flee when he was released after 3 years in prison in September 2012. He travelled to London in November 2012, where he attended a conference under the auspices of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, but then travelled back to Iran (CSW 2012).

The frequent use of release on bail with a subsequent long period of time before the case comes before the court can be interpreted as a signal to the accused to leave the country (Christians in Parliament 2015, p. 11; DIS 2014, p. 31).

Bradley (2014) believes that the Iranian regime has a strategy of forcing evangelising Christians to leave the country. He writes the following (p. 285):

Christians who are dedicated to evangelizing and discipling other believers are so closely monitored, and so frequently harassed, arrested, and threatened, that many leave Iran because they are not able to continue in their ministry inside Iran.

He claims that this method of weakening the church communities in Iran also serves the purpose of limiting the state's expenses on costly litigation and long prison sentences. Moreover, it leads to less international criticism that Iran allows Christians to leave the country (Bradley 2014, p. 258).

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