



## COI QUERY

Country of Origin	Iran
Main subject	<b>Treatment of Christians by Iranian Embassies</b>
Question(s)	<b>Information on treatment by Iranian embassies of Iranian citizens living abroad who are civilly partnered/married to a Christian or have converted to Christianity; in particular:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Are Iranian embassies informed about the conversion to Christianity of Iranian nationals living abroad, and if so, how are they informed?</li><li>- Do Iranian embassies deny access to any type of services to Iranian citizens living abroad, due to a civil partnership or marriage with a Christian spouse?</li><li>- Do Iranian embassies require Iranian converts to Christianity to sign a repentance letter to issue a travel document for them to fly back to Iran?</li></ul>
Date of completion	23 July 2018
Query Code	Q96
Contributing EU+ COI units (if applicable)	

### **Disclaimer**

*This response to a COI query has been elaborated according to the [Common EU Guidelines for Processing COI](#) and [EASO COI Report Methodology](#).*

*The information provided in this response has been researched, evaluated and processed with utmost care within a limited time frame. All sources used are referenced. A quality review has been performed in line with the above mentioned methodology. This document does not claim to be exhaustive neither conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to international protection. If a certain event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.*

*The information in the response does not necessarily reflect the opinion of EASO and makes no political statement whatsoever.*

*The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision making authorities. The answer was finalised on the 23 July 2018. Any event taking place after this date is not included in this answer.*



## COI QUERY RESPONSE

### 1. Treatment by Iranian embassies of Iranian citizens living abroad who are civilly partnered/married to a Christian or have converted to Christianity

Among all sources consulted and within the timeframe allocated to respond this Query, no information could be found with regard to the treatment, by Iranian embassies, of Christian converts living abroad who are civilly partnered/married to a Christian or have converted to Christianity. No information could be found on whether - and how - Iranian embassies are informed about the conversion to Christianity of Iranian nationals living abroad; nor on whether Iranian embassies deny Iranian nationals access to services due to civil partnership or marriage with a Christian spouse. Finally, no information was found on whether Iranian embassies require Iranian converts to Christianity to sign a repentance letter in order to issue a travel document for them to fly back to Iran.

Although not directly related to the topic of Iranian nationals converted to Christianity, the below information concerning some Iranian embassies in Europe might be worth of note.

In January 2018, a Reuters article reported that Germany Foreign Ministry summoned and rebuked Iran's ambassador for spying on individuals and institutions with close ties to Israel. A Ministry spokesperson stated that such acts were in violation of German law, and would not be tolerated<sup>1</sup>.

In April 2018, Struan Stevenson<sup>2</sup>, a Scottish politician and former Conservative Member of the European Parliament (MEP) publicly accused Iranian agents in the European Parliament of serving as political cover for terrorist acts against members of the Iranian opposition who have sought refuge in Albania<sup>3</sup>.

In a statement published on his personal website on April 2018, Struan Stevenson wrote:

'The appointment of Gholam Hossein Mohammad Nia and Mostafa Roodaki, two senior officials of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS), as the ambassador and first secretary of the embassy in Tirana has been a clear indication of the mullah's malign intentions'<sup>4</sup>.

In April 2018, the International Committee in Search of Justice<sup>5</sup> (ISJ) issued a note expressing concerns over the 'malicious campaign' launched by the government of Iran against Iranian refugees in Albania, who are members of the opposition party. In its statement, ISJ called on the European authorities to ensure 'the safety and security of the Iranian refugees and Europe as well'<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Reuters, *Germany tells Iran not to spy against Israel on its territory*, 9 January 2018 ([url](#)).

<sup>2</sup> For more information on former MPE Struan Stevenson, see: European Parliament, *MEPs - Struan Stevenson*, n.d., ([url](#)).

<sup>3</sup> EU Reporter, *Iranian agents in the European Parliament; political cover for terrorist acts against the opposition in Albania, warns campaign for #IranChange*, 9 April 2018, ([url](#)).

<sup>4</sup> Struan Stevenson (Scottish Conservatives European Parliament), *Iran sends spies to European Parliament*, 9 April 2018 ([url](#)).

<sup>5</sup> The International Committee In Search of Justice (ISJ) was established in 2008 as an informal group of EU parliamentarians to seek justice for the Iranian democratic opposition. In 2014 it was registered as a non-profit NGO in Brussels expanding its membership beyond elected parliamentarians to former officials and other dignitaries with an interest to promote human rights, freedom, democracy, peace and stability. ISJ's campaigns have enjoyed the support of over 4000 parliamentarians on both sides of the Atlantic. For more information, see: ISJ, *About us* ([url](#)).

<sup>6</sup> ISJ, *Europe should prevent Iran' secret service from acting against Iranian refugees in Albania*, 5 April 2018, ([url](#)).



Similar accusations were echoed by freelance journalist and former political prisoner from Iran, Hamid Bahrami<sup>7</sup>, who accused the Iranian regime of using 'Iran's embassies in the EU countries as a center for planning, organizing and carrying out' terrorist attacks across Europe, including killing of Iranian dissidents living abroad<sup>8</sup>.

On July 6<sup>th</sup> 2018, Reuters revealed that the Netherlands expelled two Iranian embassy staff. The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) confirmed the news, adding, however, that they will not provide any further information<sup>9</sup>.

The below information on the legal framework regulating religious freedom and conversion in Iran, as well as on the treatment of Christian converts within the country might be also relevant for the purpose of this Query.

### 1.1. Legal framework

The Iranian constitution<sup>10</sup> defines the country as an Islamic republic and states that 'all laws and regulations must be based on "Islamic criteria" and official interpretation of sharia'<sup>11</sup>. 'Within the limits of the law', Article 13 of the Constitution provides for the freedom to profess their faith to three religious minorities:

'Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognised religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education'<sup>12</sup>.

In addition, according to Article 23 of the Constitution, the 'investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief'<sup>13</sup>.

As the US Department of State (US DoS) report for 2017 notes, apostasy from Islam is a crime that can be punished with death sentence. In fact, the law prohibits Muslim citizens from changing or renouncing their religious beliefs. The only recognised conversions are those from another religion to Islam. The law also prohibits non-Muslims from engaging in public persuasion or attempted conversion of Muslims:

'These activities are considered proselytizing and punishable by death. In addition, citizens who are not recognized as Christians, Zoroastrians, or Jews may not engage in public religious

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on Hamid Bahrami, see: The National, *Journalist seeks refuge in Scotland - for filming a protest in Iran*, 17 December 2016, ([url](#)).

<sup>8</sup> Al Arabiya, *EU becomes center of Iran's terrorist operations*, 14 July 2018 ([url](#)).

<sup>9</sup> Reuters, *Netherlands expels two Iranian embassy staff: Dutch intelligence service*, 6 July 2018 ([url](#)).

<sup>10</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, *Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989*, Art. 1, available at Constitute Project, 17 January 2018 ([url](#)).

<sup>11</sup> US DoS, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2017*, 29 May 2018, p. 1 ([url](#)).

<sup>12</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, *Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989*, Art. 13, available at Constitute Project, 17 January 2018 ([url](#)).

<sup>13</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, *Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989*, Art. 13, available at Constitute Project, 17 January 2018 ([url](#)).



expression, such as worshipping in a church, or wearing religious symbols such as a cross. Some exceptions are made for foreigners belonging to unrecognized religious groups<sup>14</sup>.

An analysis conducted by the US Library of Congress on selected countries criminalising apostasy concluded that, although Iran's penal code<sup>15</sup> does not provide for the death penalty for apostasy, in practice, the courts have prosecuted individuals for apostasy 'based on their interpretation of Sharia'a and *fatwas* (legal or decrees issued by Islamic religious leaders)'<sup>16</sup>.

The aforementioned US DoS report also informs that citizens who are members of the recognised religious minorities (Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian) must register with the authorities in order to be allowed to worship their faith. Failure of churchgoers to register with the authorities may result in the closure of the churches and even in the arrest of its spiritual leaders<sup>17</sup>.

The same source further states that Christian converts are not allowed to register with the authorities and, therefore, they are not entitled to the same rights as recognised members of the Christian communities<sup>18</sup>.

Christians who have converted from Islam are considered apostates, which is a criminal offence under the Sharia law<sup>19</sup>.

## 1.2. Treatment of Christian converts in Iran

Some recent news articles<sup>20</sup> have revealed a growing trend in the number of Iranian citizens converting to Christianity.

According to an article published on February 2018 on The Christian Post<sup>21</sup>, concerns of a rise in the Christian population<sup>22</sup> have led the Iranian government to invest financial resources in an attempt to crackdown on Christian converts.

Some recent reports, mentioned below, have also registered worsening conditions for the rights of Christian minorities and harsher treatment by the Iranian authorities against Christian converts residing in Iran.

<sup>14</sup> US DoS, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2017*, 29 May 2018, p. 5 ([url](#))

<sup>15</sup> Islamic Republic of Iran, *Islamic Penal Code 1991 – Incorporating all amendments up to January 2012*, available at Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre, n.d ([url](#)).

<sup>16</sup> Library of Congress (US), *Laws criminalizing apostasy in selected jurisdictions – Iran*, May 2014, p. 7 ([url](#)).

<sup>17</sup> US DoS, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2017*, 29 May 2018, p. 6 ([url](#)).

<sup>18</sup> US DoS, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2017*, 29 May 2018, p. 6 ([url](#)).

<sup>19</sup> UK Home Office, *Country Policy and Information Note Iran: Christians and Christian converts*, March 2018, p. 5 ([url](#)).

<sup>20</sup> New York Times (The), *How Islamism drives Muslim to convert*, 25 March 2018 ([url](#)); BBC, *Iranian refugees turn to Christianity in the Netherlands*, 25 August 2017 ([url](#)); CBN News, *Exclusive: 'Jesus is building his Church' inside Iran, millions watching Christian satellite TV*, 28 January 2018 ([url](#)); Middle East Institute, *Authorities in Iran intensify crackdown on Christian converts*, 29 March 2017 ([url](#)); Christian Post, *Iran's House Church Movement Witnessing 'Astounding' Growth; Hundreds Being Baptized*, 16 November 2016, ([url](#)); Deutsche Welle, *What it's like to be a Christian in Iran*, 25 January 2016 ([url](#)).

<sup>21</sup> The Christian Post is a US-based newspaper covering news and commentaries relevant to Christians 'across denominational lines'. A member of the Evangelical Press Association and the National Association of Evangelicals, The Christian Post is a global partner of the World Evangelical Alliance. For more information, see: The Christian Post, *About us*, n.d., ([url](#)).

<sup>22</sup> Christian Post, *Iran spending millions to stifle soaring Christian population*, 7 February 2018 ([url](#)).



In its 2018 Annual Report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) informs that, throughout 2017, religious freedom in Iran continued to deteriorate for both recognised and unrecognised religious groups. Christian converts – along with Baha'is – were particularly targeted by the government: 'many were sentenced to at least 10 years in prison for their religious activities'<sup>23</sup>.

Minority Rights Group International (MRGI) confirms that, during 2017, there were periodic incidents of harassment against recognised religious minorities, especially Christians. Many of these incidents occurred during prayers, in so-called 'house churches'. These 'house churches' are informal prayer gatherings, in private homes, mostly of Christian converts who are not permitted to attend authorised churches. In its 2018 report, MRG further notes:

'Converts, for the most part, are not officially considered Christian and are treated harshly by the authorities. Although conversion is not a codified crime in Iran, judicial authorities have used national security laws to impose harsh sentences on converts, including imprisonment and floggings. In January 2017, a Tehran appeals court confirmed a five-year prison sentence for Ebrahim Firoozi, a Christian convert allegedly involved in missionary activities. Between May and August 2016, Iranian authorities reportedly arrested 79 Christian converts across Iran. The government has also shut down formally recognized churches offering services in Persian and prevented Iranians who are not Christians from entering churches'<sup>24</sup>.

In September 2017, the Country of Origin Information Division of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) conducted a joint fact-finding mission to collect updated information on some recurring issues<sup>25</sup>. Among other topics, the DIS-DRC mission focused on the treatment by Iranian authorities of 'house churches' and converts. Evidence collected by this source reveals that 'house churches' were systematically put under surveillance and raided by Iranian authorities. Information on 'house churches' raids is also documented by Amnesty International<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, the DIS-DRC joint report states that, in the past four years (2013-2017), this phenomenon of surveillance and harassment has also expanded to traditional authorised churches. The report continues:

'On 20 February 2017 the two Christian converts Anusheh Rezaabakhsh (Veronica) and Soyeyl Zargarzadeh Sani (Agostino) were arrested in Urmia. On 23 July 2017, 9 Iranian converts belonging to the Latin Catholic Church, were arrested by the Secret Service/Police in a park in Tehran. Three of them – Mehdi Amini, Saeid Saberi and Milad Poshtivan – remain in prison. [...] They received baptism when they travelled to other countries, where changing religion is not a crime. When these converts return to Iran, they are not welcomed in the recognised congregation in Iran since this will provoke severe problems not only for the Congregation but especially to the priest responsible of the Church. It is not the first time that priests are thoroughly scrutinised and threatened because of suspicion that they are welcoming Iranian Muslims or Iranian converts to their community'<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> USCIRF, *Annual Report 2018 - Tier 1: USCIRF-recommended Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) - Iran*, -, 25 April 2018, p. 44 ([url](#)).

<sup>24</sup> MRGI, *Rights denied: Violations against ethnic and religious minorities in Iran*, 13 March 2018, pp. 25, 26 ([url](#)).

<sup>25</sup> DIS, DRC (Denmark), *Iran: House Churches and Converts*, February 2018, April 2018, p. 3 ([url](#)).

<sup>26</sup> AI, *Amnesty International Report 2017/18 - The State of the World's Human Rights - Iran*, 22 February 2018, p. 199-200 ([url](#)).

<sup>27</sup> DIS, DRC (Denmark), *Iran: House Churches and Converts*, February 2018, April 2018, p. 16 ([url](#)).



The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Asma Jahangir, in her 2017 report, expresses concern related to the ‘targeting and harsh treatment’ of religious minorities including Christian converts from Islam whose faiths are considered as ‘deviant’ by the authorities. In her report, the Special Rapporteur notes:

‘These groups continue to face arbitrary arrest, harassment and detention, and are often accused of national security crimes such as “acting against the national security” or “propaganda against the state”. Under Iranian law, individuals, including Christians of Muslim backgrounds, can be prosecuted for the crime of apostasy although the crime is not specifically codified as a crime in the Islamic Penal Code’<sup>28</sup>.

In February 2018, the UN publicly called on Iran to ensure a fair and transparent final hearing for three Iranian Christians<sup>29</sup> who were due to appear before the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, for allegedly ‘conducting evangelism’ and ‘illegal house church activities’, which, according to the authorities, amount to acting against national security<sup>30</sup>.

Iran’s violation of the right to religious freedom, in particular against Christians, has also been denounced by Amnesty International in its report for the year 2017/2018. The organisation observes that ‘Christian converts received harsh prison sentences, which ranged from 10 to 15 years in several cases. Raids on house churches continued’<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> OHCHR, *Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran; Report of the Secretary-General* [A/HRC/34/40], 13 March 2017, p. 17 ([url](#)).

<sup>29</sup> RFE/RL, *Iranian Christians appeal convictions by Islamic court*, 4 February 2018, ([url](#)).

<sup>30</sup> OHCHR, *Iran must ensure rights of Christian minority and fair trial for the accused – UN experts*, 2 February 2018 ([url](#)).

<sup>31</sup> AI, *Amnesty International Report 2017/18 - The State of the World’s Human Rights - Iran*, 22 February 2018, p. 199-200 ([url](#)).



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