

Iran Human Rights Documentation Center

Living in the Shadows of Oppression: The Situation of Christian Converts in Iran

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Executive Summary

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Muslim-born converts to Christianity have been subject to the Iranian government's oppressive and discriminatory policies and practices. They have been denied the right to practice the religion of their choice openly, freely, and without fear of persecution. The churches that have services in Persian were either shut down or prohibited from admitting new converts. The properties belonging to Christians were confiscated, often without due compensation. Proselytizing non-Christians and publication of the Bible in Persian were banned. Moreover, a number of church leaders, including several Christian converts, were murdered under suspicious circumstances.

To avoid invidious state action, Christian converts began to gather in house churches. Nevertheless, they were still targeted by the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Many of them were arbitrarily arrested and sentenced to imprisonment on fabricated charges or forced to refrain from Christian activities. In recent years, more Christian converts, including church leaders, were charged with acting against national security and disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic instead of religious offenses, such as apostasy.

Article 12 of the Islamic Republic Constitution provides that the official religion of the country is Islam and the Twelver Ja'farî school, and that "this principle will remain eternally immutable."¹ Article 13 enumerates Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as recognized religious minorities. Accordingly, they are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies and to act in accordance with their own canon in matters of personal law and religious education.² Same rights have also been given to Sunni Muslims.

As the plain constitutional language provides, Christians must enjoy the freedom of religion, regardless of their denomination, ethnicity, and language. Despite this, the Islamic Republic has a narrow definition of recognized Christianity, which includes only ethnic Christians (Armenians and Assyrians/Chaldeans) and also, it seems, those who can prove they or their families were Christian prior to the 1979 revolution.³ Christian converts, alongside Bahá'ís, Dervishes, Ahl-e Haqq, Sabean-Mandaeans, and the people who believe in new mysticism are considered unrecognized religious minorities.

The freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is of a fundamental character, deriving from the inherent dignity and worth of the human being.⁴ Under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Islamic Republic is required to safeguard the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It also has an obligation to protect Iranian citizens' right to life and right to humane treatment, including access to justice and equality before the law.⁵ The

¹ Qanuni Assasi Jumhuri Islami Iran [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran] 1368 [1989], art.12, https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/content/iran_constitution

² Qanuni Assasi Jumhuri Islami Iran [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran], art.13.

³ *2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran*, Office of International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State (Jun. 30, 2020) 6, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/> See also *Iran: Christians and Christian Converts*, Country Policy, and Information Notes - UK Government (Feb. 2020) 13, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1253351/download>

⁴ GERALDINE BUEREN, *THE INTERNATIONAL LAW ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD* 151 (1998).

⁵ 999 U.N.T.S. 171; S. Exec. Doc. E, 95-2 (1978); S. Treaty Doc. 95-20; 6 I.L.M. 368 (1967) [hereinafter ICCPR].

Islamic Republic, however, perceives Christian converts as a potential threat to its ideological foundation and systematically discriminate against them in different ways.

Introduction

One afternoon, a group of Christian converts had gathered to pray in the privacy of the home of a Christian couple in Shiraz. Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi and Marzieh Rahemi, who hosted the church meeting, never thought that day would change their lives. Suddenly, plain-clothes security forces poured into their home. They showed no warrant, but they searched everyone and everywhere. They confiscated the attendees' belongings—including cell phones, ID cards, valuable items, and Bibles—and destroyed the church signs, such as a picture of Jesus Christ. A number of the attendees, including Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi, were arrested, while others were forced to sign a pledge stating that they will not attend any church. The agents acted violently and intimidated church members. Many Christian converts have seen such scenes and have similar experiences.

Christians in Iran include the native communities of Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans, in addition to the growing population of converts to Christianity from Islam.⁶ The majority of ethnic Christians follow the Orthodox or Catholic denominations, hold services in their own liturgical languages, and do not proselytize among Muslims.⁷ They are viewed as culturally Christian. While they are not equal to Muslims under Iranian law, the Iranian Constitution states that they are free to practice their religion, and they are not targeted on the charge of apostasy.⁸

Those who convert to Christianity from Islam typically follow Protestant denominations, including Anglican, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches. Meanwhile, some converts belong to non-denominational churches.⁹ Iranian Christian converts often have their own theological interpretation of the doctrine of Trinity, diverging from evangelical churches in the West.¹⁰ They evangelize Muslims, and their church services are in Persian.¹¹ Although there are no precise statistics on the number of Christian converts, it is believed that their population is growing fast.¹² Despite this, the Iranian government denies their status as Christian. A number of

⁶ *Christian Converts in Iran*, Suuntaus Project - Finnish Immigration Service (Aug. 21, 2015) 2, https://migri.fi/documents/5202425/5914056/62318_Suuntaus-raportti_Kristityt_kaannynnaiset_IranissaFINALFINAL160915_2_.pdf/5d13ea14-9aa8-4896-a737-7bcd5a8d4c24

⁷ *Iran: Christians and Converts*, Landinfo - Country of Origin Information Center (July 7, 2011) 8-9, https://www.landinfo.no/asset/1772/1/1772_1.pdf

⁸ David Varnish, *Trend Continues against Churches Previously Protected by the Iranian Government*, Mission Network News (Feb. 24, 2010), <https://www.mnnonline.org/news/trend-continues-against-churches-previously-protected-by-iranian-government/>

⁹ A. CHRISTIAN VAN GORDER, *CHRISTIANITY IN PERSIA AND THE STATUS OF NON-MUSLIMS IN IRAN* 199 (2010).

¹⁰ James Marchant et al., *Heretics: Iran's Religious Minorities*, Small Media (2014) 56, <https://www.smallmedia.org.uk/heretics/heretics.pdf> See also Landinfo - Country of Origin Information Center, *supra* note 7 at 11-12.

¹¹ Michael Nazir-Ali, *Christianity in Iran: A Brief Survey*, 9 INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH 37 (2009). See also *Iran: Religious and Ethnic Minorities; Discrimination in Law and Practice*, Human Rights Watch (Sept. 1997) 20, available at <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/i/iran/iran979.pdf> (discussing that Protestant churches had services in Persian during the 1990s).

¹² Suuntaus Project - Finnish Immigration Service, *supra* note 6.

them have been charged with offenses ranging from acting against national security to apostasy, and they have been convicted in grossly unfair trials.

This report first discusses conversion from Islam under Shi‘a jurisprudence. In the second section, the report explains the charges levelled against Christian converts under Iranian law. In the third section, the report explains the government’s waves of oppression against the Christian convert community since the early years of the Islamic Republic. The cases of extrajudicial murder of church leaders and cases in which Christian converts have been charged with apostasy are explored in the fourth and fifth sections, respectively. In the sixth section, the accounts of witnesses interviewed by the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (“IHRDC”) demonstrate the current context in which Christian converts have been denied their basic human rights. The report then scrutinizes government policy of confiscating properties of Christians and diminishing the Christians’ presence in Iran. Finally, the report discusses how the government’s policies and practices with respect to Christian converts violate both Iranian law and Iran’s international human rights commitments.

1. Conversion to Another Religion in Shi‘a Jurisprudence

Islam regards Jews and Christians as *ahl al-kitāb* or the People of the Book, which refers to the people who have received a revelation and a scripture from God.¹³ If a follower of an Abrahamic religion becomes Muslim, that individual not only does not face any adverse consequences, but also will receive the legal protections not given to him or her previously.¹⁴ On the other hand, Muslims may be accused of apostasy if they change their religion from Islam and fail to repent.¹⁵ The Qur’an does not explicitly state that apostasy is a punishable crime.¹⁶ Several oral traditions attributed to the Shi‘a Imams have formed the foundation of sentencing apostates to death under Shi‘a jurisprudence.¹⁷

Despite some disagreements, the majority of conservative Shi‘a jurists, including Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder and first Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, have stated that converting to another religion from Islam or atheism establishes apostasy.¹⁸ Shi‘a jurisprudence distinguishes between an apostate who is born to Muslim parents (*murtad-i fitri*)

¹³ JOHN L. ESPOSITO, WHAT EVERYONE NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT ISLAM 70-1 (2002).

¹⁴ Qanuni Madani [Civil Code], Tehran 1307 (1928), arts. 881(bis),1059, 1192, <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/97937>

¹⁵ *Pāsukh Mohammad Fazel Lankarani [Response of Mohammad Fazel Lankarani]*, Kadivar.com (Jul. 21, 2014), <https://kadivar.com/8979/>

¹⁶ ABDULLAH SAEED & HASSAN SAEED, FREEDOM OF RELIGION, APOSTASY, AND ISLAM 36 (2004).

¹⁷ According to an important oral tradition [*hadith*] from the seventh Shi‘a Imam, Mousa Kazem, a Muslim who has converted to Christianity must be killed. In another *hadith*, Imam Mohammad Baqir, the fifth Shi‘a Imam, defines an apostate as someone who has repudiated Islam and denied the revelation to the Prophet Mohammad. The repentance of such a person is not accepted, and he must be killed. His wife will be divorced, and his estate will be distributed among his heirs. See MOHAMMAD IBN YA‘QUB AL-KULIYĀNĪ, AL-KĀFĪ 256-7 (3rd. ed. 2009), <https://bit.ly/37zMg7W>

¹⁸ *Apostasy in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (Sept. 25, 2014) 50, <https://iranhrdc.org/apostasy-in-the-islamic-republic-of-iran/> See also *Barasī Maqūli Irtidād Dar Ārā’ Āndīshmandān Iran [Discussion about Apostasy in the Views of Iranian Thinkers]*, 3danet.ir, available at <https://3danet.ir/%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021) (discussing different Shi‘a jurists’ ideas about the acts that constitute apostasy).

and an apostate who is born to non-Muslim parents (*murtad-i milli*). Ayatollah Khomeini ruled that the repentance of a male *murtad-i fitri* is not accepted and he must be killed.¹⁹ The *murtad-i milli*, however, is given three days to repent, and he will be executed only if he does not repent.²⁰ A female apostate, however, shall not be killed.²¹ She must be imprisoned for life, beaten at times of prayer, and given only a small portion of food. If she repents, then she is to be set free.²²

In response to a specific religious inquiry, which is called *istiftā*, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stated that if someone was born Muslim but later decided to follow another Abrahamic religion, that person is an apostate.²³ He, however, provided that if such a person married another former Muslim in accordance with the canon of their new religion, then the children born into their marriage are not apostates.²⁴ Depending on their religion, these children could enjoy the constitutional rights preserved for the state-recognized religious minorities.²⁵

Similarly, Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi, a conservative Shi‘a cleric, stated that a former Muslim who has chosen a new religion and held himself out as an adherent of the new religion must be convicted of apostasy.²⁶ Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani, another senior Shi‘a cleric, ruled that a person cannot be considered an apostate unless there is evidence indicating that he has denied the revelation to the Prophet Mohammad.²⁷ He stated that murdering such a person is obligatory and does not need a judge’s order.²⁸ In the same manner, Ayatollah Mohammad-Sadeq Rouhani, who is a radical Shi‘a jurist, issued a fatwa declaring that murdering an individual who has insulted the Prophet Mohammad and Shi‘a Imams is allowed without judicial process.²⁹

Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, who was one of the highest-ranking Shi‘a jurists, stated that the mere doubt or change of mind about religion does not lead to an apostasy charge punishable

¹⁹ ROHOLLAH KHOMEINI, TAHRĪR AL-WASĪLA 527-8 (Sayyid Ali Reza Naqavi, trans., 2001), <https://rb.gy/zjkkpe>

²⁰ SAYYID MUSTAFA MOHAQIQ DAMAD, DĀ’IRATUL MA’ĀRIF BUZURG ISLĀMĪ JILD 7 [GREAT ISLAMIC ENCYCLOPEDIA, VOL. 7] 443 (1996).

²¹ AL-HURR AL-AMILI, 28 WASĀ’IL AL-SHĪ‘A 330-31, <https://bit.ly/3aIDgQK>

²² KHOMEINI, *supra* note 19 at 227.

²³ Fatwā is the authoritative ruling of a religious scholar on questions of Islamic jurisprudence. The process of requesting a fatwā is termed *istiftā*. See *Fatwā*, Encyclopædia Iranica, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/fatwa> See also E-mail from the Office of Supreme Leader (fatwa@leader.ir), to Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad, (Jan. 2, 2009, GMT +1:08) (Appendix A, Item 1).

²⁴ E-mail from the Office of Supreme Leader (fatwa@leader.ir), to Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad, (Jan. 2, 2009, GMT +1:08) (Appendix A, Item 1).

²⁵ E-mail from the Office of Supreme Leader (fatwa@leader.ir), to Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad, *istiftā* No. 143069 (Jan. 13, 2010, GMT +17:36) (Appendix A, Item 2).

²⁶ *Entikhāb Dīn Ghīr Āz Islām Pas Āz Taḥqīq [Choosing a Religion Other Than Islam After Research]*, Makarem.ir, <https://makarem.ir/main.aspx?typeinfo=21&lid=0&mid=255142&catid=44743> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi believes that if one of the spouses converts to Christianity from Islam, another spouse must seek divorce. See *Fatāwāy Āyatullāh Makarem Shirazi Dar Mūrid Āḥkām Murtad [Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi’s Fatwās about Apostate’s Rulings]*, Tabnak News (Dec. 5, 2018), <https://bit.ly/3c3JaNi>

²⁷ Letter from the Office of Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani, to Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad, Automatic No. 65856, File No. 284/7/89 (Oct. 2, 2010) (Appendix A, Item 3).

²⁸ *Fatāwāy Āyatullāh Safi Golpaygani Dar Mūrid Irtidād [Ayatollah Safi Golpaygani’s Fatwās about Apostasy]*, Tabnak News (Dec. 4, 2018), <https://bit.ly/38A4iaS>

²⁹ *Fatāwāy Āyatullāh Rouhani Darbārih Ihānat Bi Ma’šūmīn [Ayatollah Rouhani’s Fatwā about Insulting the Shi‘a Holy Figures]*, Shia News (May 17, 2012), <https://bit.ly/3dIbyEa>

by execution provided that it occurs subsequent to the individual's investigation.³⁰ Ayatollah Yousef Saanei, another senior Shi'a cleric, defined the apostate as a person who disrespectfully denies God or the mission of the Prophet Mohammad after practicing Islam. Therefore, a person who explores religions cannot be convicted as an apostate.³¹ Mohsen Kadivar, a professor of Islamic studies, also stated that the Qur'an's order against coercion in religion means that people are free in both accepting and leaving Islam.³²

2. Charges Attributed to Christian Converts

The Islamic Republic has charged a considerable number of Christian converts of the following offenses and tried them accordingly. This section provides the details and context of these offenses.

2.1. Apostasy

In Iran's civil law system, the lack of statutory specification is more problematic than it would be under a common law system. Apostasy is a capital offense, punishable by death. Nevertheless, it has not been specifically defined under Iranian law.³³ In apostasy cases, courts have invoked Article 167 of the Constitution, which provides that if the judge cannot find codified laws as the basis for his judgment, he should deliver his ruling on the basis of authoritative Islamic sources and time-honored fatwas.³⁴ Similarly, Article 220 of the Islamic Penal Code ("IPC") stipulates that where the law is silent, particularly when the *hodud* [plural for *hadd*] punishments have not been mentioned, courts should comply with Article 167 of the Constitution and apply authoritative Islamic sources.³⁵ According to Article 15 of the IPC, *hodud* is a punishment whose details are determined by Shari'a law.³⁶

It should be noted that Shi'a jurists have various, and sometimes contradictory, opinions about apostasy. For this reason, following their fatwas by judges may result in different outcomes in apostasy cases. Second, the IPC has no explicit provision defining the manner in which a charge of apostasy may be proven. It prescribes the types of evidence by which the commission of any

³⁰ Mahdi Jami, *Āyatullāh Muntazirī: Har Taghyr Mazhabī Irtdād Nīst* [Ayatollah Montazeri: Not Every Change of Religion Is Apostasy], BBC Persian (Feb. 2, 2005), https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/story/2005/02/050202_mj-montazeri-renegade

³¹ E-mail from the Office of Ayatollah Yousef Saanei (answer@saanei.net), to Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad, Letter No. 101743 (Sept. 22, 2010) (Appendix A, Item 4).

³² Mohsen Kadivar, *Risāliyi Naqdi Mujāzāt Murtad Va Sāb ul-Nabī* [Treatise on the Punishment of the Apostate and the Person Who Insulted the Prophet] (2011), <http://mkadivar.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Kadivar-Criticism-of-Punishment-for-Apostasy-and-Religious-Insulting.pdf>

³³ Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, *supra* note 18 at 4.

³⁴ Qanuni Assasi Jumhuri Islami Iran [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran], art. 167. In a same manner, Article 3 of the Civil Code of Procedure for Public and Revolutionary Courts provides that the judge must rule based on authoritative Islamic sources and reputable fatwas, if the laws are not complete or explicit or conflicting, or if there is no law at all in the case. *See* Qanuni Ayin Dadrasi Dadgah Hay'umumi va Enqilab Dar Omor Madani [Civil Section of the Code of Procedure for Public and Revolutionary Courts], 1379 [2000], <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/93305>

³⁵ Qanuni Mojazat Islami [Islamic Penal Code], Tehran 1392 [2013], art.220, <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/103202/125190/>

³⁶ Qanuni Mojazat Islami [Islamic Penal Code], art.15.

crime, including apostasy, can be proven that include the confession of the accused, the testimony of two male witnesses, and the judge's knowledge.³⁷ Third, the principle of *dar'a* (rejecting) in *hodud* punishments prohibits judges from issuing a ruling where they have any doubt or uncertainty about the elements of the crime.³⁸ Without a uniform definition of apostasy and its criminal elements, the legal framework within which apostasy cases are prosecuted is uncertain. For this reason, the penalties meted in these cases have ranged from prison sentences to the death penalty—with no clear guidance as to when a sentence should be more severe.

Under Iranian law, extra-judicial killing of a person believed to be an apostate will not be prosecuted like a typical murder. Unlike other murder cases, the perpetrator will not be sentenced to the death penalty (*qiṣaṣ*), provided the victim had committed apostasy.³⁹ The perpetrator, instead, will be sentenced to imprisonment under the *ta'zir* category.⁴⁰ *Ta'zir* is a punishment for an act that is religiously prohibited, but for which no specific punishment has been set out in religious texts.⁴¹ Under this category, a person convicted of murder could be sentenced to three to ten years' imprisonment.

2.2. Insulting the Prophet

The crime of *Sabb-e Nabi*, or insulting the Prophet Mohammad, has been codified in Articles 262 and 263 of the IPC. Under Article 262, a person who insults the Prophet Mohammad or other Prophets could be sentenced to death. Insulting Shi'a Imams and Fatima, the Prophet Mohammad's daughter, are also punishable by death. Article 263 states that statements made in certain circumstances such as anger or intoxication cannot be the basis of a charge of insulting the Prophet.⁴²

2.3. Insulting Sacred Values of Islam

According to Article 513 of the IPC, anyone who insults sacred values of Islam, the Prophet Mohammad or Shi'a holy figures shall be executed, if his or her action amounted to *Sabb-e Nabi*. Otherwise, he or she shall be sentenced to one to five years' imprisonment.⁴³ The crime of insulting sacred values of Islam, however, does not have a clear definition in the IPC.⁴⁴ The criteria for establishing this crime are the same as other crimes: the confession of the accused, the testimony of two male witnesses, or the judge's knowledge.⁴⁵

³⁷ *Id.*, art. 160, 211.

³⁸ Ahmad Haji Dehabadi, *Qā'idih Dar'a Dar Fiqh Imāmīyih Va Huqūq Irān [Dar'a Principle in Imamiah Jurisprudence and Iranian Laws]*, 6 Fiqh VA Huqūq [JURISPRUDENCE AND LAW] 2005, <https://bit.ly/3ikHGjq>

³⁹ Qanuni Mojazat Islami [Islamic Penal Code], art. 302 (a).

⁴⁰ "Anyone who commits a murder and where there is no complainant, or there is a complainant, but he has forgiven and withdrawn his application for *Qiṣaṣ*, or if *Qiṣaṣ* is not executed for any reason, if his act disrupts the public order and safety of the society or it is thought that it emboldens the offender or others [to commit murder again], the court shall sentence the offender to three to ten years' imprisonment." Qanuni Mojazat Islami Ketab Panjum [Islamic Penal Code, Vol. 5], Tehran 1375 [1996], art. 612, <https://rb.gy/3qnssu>

⁴¹ Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, *supra* note 18 at 22.

⁴² Qanuni Mojazat Islami [Islamic Penal Code], art. 262, 263.

⁴³ Qanuni Mojazat Islami Ketab Panjum [Islamic Penal Code, Vol. 5], art. 513.

⁴⁴ Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, *supra* note 18 at 23-24.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 26.

A number of Christian converts were sentenced to imprisonment for the vaguely defined charge of insulting sacred values of Islam. Their participation in church activities often was cited as the basis for this accusation. Amin Afshar Naderi, a Christian convert, was put on trial on charges of “insulting the sanctities of Islam” and “founding and administering an illegal organization” in 2017. The Revolutionary Court in Tehran, presided over by Judge Mashallah Ahmadzadeh, sentenced him to fifteen years’ imprisonment, five years of which were imposed for “insulting the sanctities of Islam.”⁴⁶

2.4. Acting Against National Security

According to Article 498 of the Fifth Book of the IPC, anyone with “any ideology” who forms or manages a group of more than two persons that “aims to disrupt national security” will be sentenced to two to ten years’ imprisonment, if not found guilty of *moharebeh* [waging war against God].⁴⁷ Also, anyone who joins such groups may be sentenced to three to five years of imprisonment, “unless proven that he or she has been unaware of its purposes.”⁴⁸ Over the past decades, several Christian converts were charged with acting against national security through setting up and participating in house churches.⁴⁹ Hadi Asgari and Kavian Fallah Mohammadi, for instance, were sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment on the charge of founding or leading an organization [house church] that allegedly aims to disrupt national security.⁵⁰

Judges often invoke Article 500 of the Fifth Book of the IPC, which provides that “Anyone who engages in any type of disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran,” shall be sentenced to three months to one year’s imprisonment.⁵¹ In 2018, at least twelve Christian converts in Bushehr received one-year prison sentences on the charge of disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic.⁵² Iranian courts interpret any participation in house churches, evangelizing Muslims, and propagation of evangelical Christianity as actions against national security.

2.5. Amendments to Islamic Penal Code

In 2020, the Iranian Parliament amended the Fifth Book of the Islamic Penal Code. The amendments to Article 499 of the Fifth Book of the IPC provides that anyone who “causes division or violence” through insulting or spreading lies about divine religions shall be sentenced

⁴⁶ Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons’ Atlas], Amin Afshar Naderi’s profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/en/prisoner/2736/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

⁴⁷ Qanuni Mojazat Islami Ketab Panjum [Islamic Penal Code, Vol. 5], art. 498.

⁴⁸ *Id.*, art. 499.

⁴⁹ Reza Jamali, *Muṣādirih Milk Muti ‘aliq Bi Yik Kilīsā Āz Sūyi Sitād Ejrāiyy Farmāni Emām* [“Confiscation” of a Property Belonging to a Church by Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam], Radio Farda (Mar. 10, 2018), https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f4_iran_organization_seize_property_church_garden/29090533.html

⁵⁰ Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons’ Atlas], Kavian Fallah Mohammadi’s profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/en/prisoner/2742/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021). *See also* Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons’ Atlas], Hadi Asgari’s profile, available at <https://ipa.united4iran.org/en/prisoner/2739/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

⁵¹ Qanuni Mojazat Islami Ketab Panjum [Islamic Penal Code, Vol. 5], art.500.

⁵² *Mahkūmiyat 12 Nū Kīsh Masīhī Dar Būshīhr: Guzārishī Āz Sharḥ Parvandih Payām Kharāmān* [Conviction of 12 Christian Converts in Bushehr; Report about the Case of Payam Kharaman], HRANA (Aug. 10, 2018), <https://www.hra-news.org/2018/hranews/a-16522/>

to imprisonment or fine, if not found guilty of *hadd* punishments. If such actions are committed within a “criminal organized group,” or published in “the real or virtual sphere” through communication tools, the prescribed punishment will be intensified. The amendment to Article 500 of the Fifth Book of the IPC lists “any action that causes psychological domination over another person” as a punishable offense.⁵³ Considering the Iranian courts’ precedents, these amendments will expand government power to convict Christian converts under vague terms.⁵⁴

3. Living in the Shadows of Oppression (1979-Present)

Most of the Protestant churches in Iran were established by European or American missionaries during the 19th and 20th centuries.⁵⁵ The Iranian government allowed missionaries to operate in the country, and they established schools, churches, and hospitals in different cities.⁵⁶ In February 1979, however, Ayatollah Khomeini established an Islamic government based on the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*, or Guardianship of the Jurist, which institutionalized religious discrimination.⁵⁷

The newly established government soon started to take over churches, schools, and hospitals built by missionaries.⁵⁸ The churches that had connections with overseas Christian groups were perceived as dangerous, and their associates were labelled as “spies of the West.”⁵⁹ Despite such pressure, a number of Iranian churches were able to renew their official registration as church institutions.⁶⁰

Compared to the Catholic denominations, the Iranian Protestant churches suffered more severe treatment due to their tendency to proselytize.⁶¹ Different Protestant churches, however, were subjected to different levels of oppression. Although the Episcopal Church was severely attacked and its institutions were forcibly shut down in 1980, other Protestant churches, including

⁵³ *Eşlâh Tarh Elhâq Dû Mâdih Bi Kitâb Panjûm Qanuni Mujâzât Islâmî /Ta ‘yîn Mujâzât Barây Tühîn Bi Qûmîyat Hâ Va Âdyân Elâhî [Correction of Two Amendments to the Fifth Book of the Islamic Pena Code/ Determining Punishment for Insulting Ethnicities and Divine Religions]*, Fars News Agency (Nov. 1, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2KL0lv2>

⁵⁴ *New Law in Iran Threatens More Arrests of Christians, Rights Advocates Say*, ChristianResponse.com (June 30, 2020), <https://christianresponse.org/news/new-law-in-iran-threatens-more-arrests-of-christians-rights-advocates-say/>

⁵⁵ ELIZ SANASARIAN, RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN IRAN 43-4 (2000). See also Marchant et al., *supra* note 10 at 51.

⁵⁶ *Tārīkh Masīhīyat Dar Iran; Qismat Ākhar [The History of Christianity in Iran; Last Section]*, Kalameh.com, <https://bit.ly/3aVsSFS> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

⁵⁷ Ayatollah Khomeini’s approach toward religious minorities was based on the *dhimmī* rules, which holds that non-Muslim communities can function as long as they pay special taxes [*Jizya*] and respect the conditions of the Muslim state. See KATHRYN SPELLMAN, RELIGION AND NATION; IRANIAN LOCAL AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS IN BRITAIN 163 (2004). Ayatollah Khomeini was among the Shi’a clerics who believed in impurity of non-Muslims [*Nijāsāt*]. See Seyed Mohammad Mousavi Bojnordi & Farnaz Afzali Qaderi, *Tāsīr Ti’ūrī Zamān Va Makān Bar Āhkām Zīmīh Bā Rūykarđī Bar Naẓar Emām Khomeini [The Impact of the Theory of Time and Place Requirements on the dhimmī Principles with an Approach to Imam Khomeini’s Opinion]*, 62 MATIN RESEARCH JOURNAL, 21-49 (2014), http://matin.ri-khomeini.ac.ir/article_60486.html See also KHOMEINI, *supra* note 19 at 530-540 (discussing the social status and rights of religious minorities from the perspective of Ayatollah Khomeini).

⁵⁸ Mansour Borji, *40 Years of Religious Apartheid: Christianity in Post-Revolution Iran*, Article 18 (Feb. 11, 2019), <https://articleeighteen.com/analysis/2884/>

⁵⁹ VAN GORDER, *supra* note 9 at 178.

⁶⁰ SANASARIAN, *supra* note 55 at 123.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 124.

Presbyterian and Pentecostal, could continue their services without uniform persecution during the 1980s.⁶² These churches, which were mostly comprised of Armenian and Assyrian Christians or long-time converts, remained open and held services in Persian, albeit under more restrictions on church attendance.⁶³

Christian proselytizing and publication of the Bible in Persian were also banned.⁶⁴ The Iranian Bible Society was shut down in 1990. The closure caused a great shortage of the Bible and Christian theological books in Persian up until the present.⁶⁵ In addition, the Iranian government isolated Christian communities from the rest of the world. Western missionaries were expelled, and Iranian believers were not allowed to collaborate with their co-religionists outside the country.⁶⁶

Due to the government's policy against Christians' presence in Iran, a number of churches in different cities have been abandoned or destroyed in recent years. The Islamic Republic has not authorized the construction of new churches or renovation of existing churches, and it has also undermined the leadership of churches in Iran.⁶⁷ Some reports indicate that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps ("IRGC") intelligence recently took over the oversight of Christian churches, which were previously overseen by the Ministry of Intelligence and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.⁶⁸ The state-recognized churches are always under surveillance. IRGC intelligence agents usually attend worship services and check the list of church members on a regular basis so that no Christian convert can participate.⁶⁹

3.1. Episcopal Church

The Episcopal Church was established by the Church Missionary Society in the early twentieth century in Isfahan.⁷⁰ In 1979, Hassan Dehqani-Tafti was the Anglican bishop of Iran, the first ethnic Persian who served in this position. In the turmoil of the revolution, he wrote a letter to Ayatollah Khomeini pledging support for the building of a just and free Iranian society.⁷¹ Despite this, he, his family, and the Episcopal Church were soon severely impacted by the revolution.

⁶² SPELLMAN, *supra* note 57 at 163.

⁶³ SANASARIAN, *supra* note 55 at 123.

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Coming to Seoul*, Anglican Communion, <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/53266/coming-to-seoul.pdf> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

⁶⁶ *Western Missionary Released from Prison in Iran*, World scope Electronic Magazine, <http://www.churchlink.com.au/churchlink/worldscope/communiogram/iran2.html> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

⁶⁷ Mansour Borji, *A Recipe for Intolerance: Iran's Blueprint for Cracking Down on Christians*, Middle East Institute (Dec. 9, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3sfnDGi>

⁶⁸ *Protestant Church Shutdown Sparks Fears of Coming Closure Spree*, Center for Human Rights in Iran (formerly: International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran) (June 8, 2012), <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2012/06/protestant-church/>

⁶⁹ Office of International Religious Freedom, *supra* note 3 at 19-20.

⁷⁰ Guli Francis-Dehqani, *Dialogue Under Persecution: Anglicanism in Iran Engaging with Shi'a Islam*, 96 THE ANGLICAN THEOLOGICAL REVIEW 133-5 (2014), http://www.anglicantheologicalreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/francis_96.1.pdf

⁷¹ Richard Harries, *The Rt Rev Hassan Dehqani-Tafti; Exiled Iranian Bishop Preaching Forgiveness*, The Guardian (May. 20, 2008), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/may/21/anglicanism.iran>

In August 1979, a group of men, which Bishop Dehqani-Tafti described as “ruffianly but obviously highly organized,” raided and looted his home and office in Isfahan.⁷² Bishop Dehqani-Tafti later stated that several members of the local Islamic Propagation Society (*Anjuman Tablighat Islami*) were the main culprit. They had been harassing the church associates for years.⁷³ The new government started to threaten Dehqani-Tafti to hand over the church’s properties and funds.⁷⁴ He was briefly imprisoned and interrogated.⁷⁵ In November 1979, several gunmen tried to kill Dehqani-Tafti and his wife in their bedroom during the night, but they survived.⁷⁶ A group of Anglican leaders sent a message to Ayatollah Khomeini, asking him to order an investigation about this incident. They never received a response, and the perpetrators were never identified.⁷⁷ After this incident, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti left Iran.⁷⁸

In August 1980, Bishop Dehqani-Tafti and a number of Episcopal Church members were charged with spying for the UK. This group included Iraj Kalimi Mottahedeh (the priest in charge of St. Luke’s Church in Isfahan), Nosratollah Sharifian (the priest in charge of St. Andrew’s Church in Kerman), Rev. Khalil Razm-Ara, Rev. Paul Hunt, Dimitri Bellos (the diocesan officer), and Margaret Jean Waddell (the bishop’s secretary, who had already survived an assassination attempt in May 1979). All of them, except Hassan Dehqani-Tafti who was outside the country, were arrested.⁷⁹ Eventually, Anglican Communion representatives successfully negotiated their release with Iranian officials.⁸⁰

⁷² *Islamic Republic of Iran Confiscates Anglican Church Compound in Isfahan*, Anglican Ink (Sept. 28, 2020), <https://anglican.ink/2020/09/28/islamic-republic-of-iran-confiscates-anglican-church-compound-in-isfahan/>

⁷³ SANASARIAN, *supra* note 55 at 123.

⁷⁴ *Guftūgiyy Bā Osqf Dehqani-Tafti Va Hamsarishān Margaret; 2 [Interview with Bishop Dehqani-Tafti and His Wife, Margaret; Second]*, Kalameh.com, <https://bit.ly/2Jvdtk6> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

⁷⁵ *Id.* See also Dehqani, *supra* note 70 at 138.

⁷⁶ Harries, *supra* note 71.

⁷⁷ Amir-Sam Goudarzi, *Kishīsh Hāay Ki Bi Dast Jumhūrī Islāmī Tirūr Shudand [The Christian Ministers Who Were Assassinated by the Islamic Republic]*, Radio Zamaneh (Jan. 17, 2021), <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/570002> Some reports indicate that the perpetrators were associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Committees and the IRGC in Isfahan. See Iraj Mesdaghi, *Ghulam Hossein Mustaghimi Tehrani – Sarnivisht Yik Tirūrīst Vilāyī [Ghulam Hossein Mostaghimi Tehrani – The Fate a Faithful Terrorist to Velayat Faghih]*, Radio Zamaneh (Apr. 9, 2019), <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/440574>

⁷⁸ Harries, *supra* note 71.

⁷⁹ During a press conference in August 1980, Dr. Ali Asghar Behzadnia, the deputy to the Minister of National Guidance (later became the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance) at the time, declared that the Iranian government discovered a letter from the Episcopal Church leaders to a Pentagon officer. He claimed that they appreciated the United States government for sending them 500 million dollars, which allegedly had been distributed among the Iranian army officers, the Baha’i leaders, and anti-revolutionaries to stage a coup d’état against the Islamic Republic. The British Foreign Office later debunked the letter as a fake. According to the British government documents, Behzadnia was close to the Liberation Movement of Iran. See Majid Tafreshi, *Ravābiṭ Iran Va Brīṭāniyā Dar Āsnād Ārshīv Milī Brīṭāniyā Dar Sāl 1980 [Iran-Britain Relations in the Documents of the British National Archive in 1980]*, TarikhIrani.ir (Feb. 8, 2011), <https://bit.ly/388Bffd> Dr. Ali Asghar Behzadnia is currently practicing in Costa Mesa, California. See Dr. Ali Asghar Behzadnia, Doctor.com, <https://www.doctor.com/Dr-Ali-Behzadnia> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

⁸⁰ TERRY WAITE, TAKEN ON TRUST 2016. Episcopal Church members were released in February 1981. See Tafreshi, *supra* note 79.

Despite all the pressure from the Islamic Republic, the Episcopal Church continued to exist, albeit on a very small scale.⁸¹ In 1990, Iraj Mottahedeh became the diocesan bishop of Iran, and he was the only Anglican priest in Iran until 2004.⁸² Following his retirement, Azad Marshall, a Pakistani priest, was invited to take over episcopal oversight as there was no candidate in Iran.⁸³ In 2017, Dr. Albert Sundararaj Walters, who is originally from Malaysia, became the Vicar-General of Iran. The Iranian government did not renew his visa in 2019. The Diocese of Iran, which currently has no bishop of its own, consists of St. Luke's Church and St. Paul's Church in Isfahan, St. Simon the Zealot's Church in Shiraz, and St. Paul's Church in Tehran.⁸⁴



The outside door and the altar in St. Luke's Anglican Church in Isfahan's Abbas Abad neighborhood.

3.2. Assembly of God Church

The Assembly of God Church, also known as *Jamā'at Rabbānī*, is an evangelical denomination with members from different religious and ethnic backgrounds in Iran. This church was able to renew its official registration as a church institution in 1979.⁸⁵ The Assembly of God denomination had several Persian-language churches across the country.⁸⁶ At least two Armenian

⁸¹ *Anglican churches in Iran?* EpiscopalCafe.com (Mar. 3, 2016), <https://www.episcopalcafe.com/anglican-churches-in-iran/>

⁸² *First Persian Woman to Be Ordained to the Episcopate Consecrated in Canterbury Cathedral*, Anglican Communion News Agency (Nov. 30, 2017), <https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2017/11/first-persian-woman-to-be-ordained-to-the-episcopate-consecrated-in-canterbury-cathedral.aspx>

⁸³ Dehqani, *supra* note 70 at 135.

⁸⁴ Iran, *Jerusalem & the Middle East Church Association*, <https://www.jmeca.org.uk/christianity-middle-east/anglican-episcopal-church/iran> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021). One report indicate that a person name Payam Mousavi, who does not appear to be a priest, is currently in charge of the St. Luke's Church in Isfahan. See *Safar Bi Isfahān Muṣāḥibih Bā Nābīnāyān Pīshkīsvat Va Bāzdīd Az Mazra'ih Kūrūsh [Travel to Isfahan Interview with Senior Blind People and Visiting the Cyrus Farm]*, handicapcenter.com (May. 20, 2020), <http://www.handicapcenter.com/2020/05/20/26742>

⁸⁵ Jamali, *supra* note 49.

⁸⁶ *Osuf Haik Hovsepian-Mehr, Shahīd Masīhī Irānī, 1323-1372 [Bishop Haik Hovsepian-Mehr, Iranian Christian Martyr, 1944-1993]*, Ikelisa.com (Feb. 22, 2019), <https://bit.ly/3nmGmwR>. See also *Muṣāḥibih Bā Kishīsh Nīnūs Yūḥanā [Interview with Pastor Ninus Yohana]*, Kalameh.com, available at <https://bit.ly/2LiTN48> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021) (discussing the establishment and operation of the Assembly of God Church in Urmia). See also ZARIN BIHRAVESH, *TARIKH-I KILISAY-I MASIHI DAR IRAN [HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN IRAN]* 158 (1988) (discussing the establishment of Persian-language churches affiliated with the Assembly of God denomination in Arak, Sari, Mashhad, and Rasht).

churches in Tehran and Hamedan and one Assyrian church in Kermanshah were also affiliated with the Assembly of God Church.⁸⁷

During the years after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the number of new Christian converts who attended Persian-language church services, including in the Assembly of God congregations, increased.⁸⁸ In reaction, the Islamic Republic unleashed a new wave of oppression against evangelical churches, the Assembly of God in particular.⁸⁹ The Persian-language Assembly of God congregations in Mashhad, Sari, Kerman, Shiraz, Gorgan, Ahvaz, Tabriz, Kermanshah, and Arak were shut down from the late 1980s to the early 1990s.⁹⁰



Anglican Church of Mashhad (left) and Assembly of God Church in Gorgan (right). Both churches are abandoned.

The Islamic Republic adopted a policy of gradual eradication of existing churches, the Assembly of God Church in particular, under legal pretexts.⁹¹ The church service in Persian, baptizing new members, and publication of the Bible and other Christian literature in Persian were banned. In addition, the churches' attempts to register their organizations were blocked and their leadership development was inhibited.⁹² The turning point in government confrontation with the Assembly of God Church was the execution of Pastor Hossein Soodmand on the charge of apostasy in 1990, and the extrajudicial murders of four church leaders in 1994 and 1996.

⁸⁷ Ikelisa.com, *supra* note 86.

⁸⁸ Borji, *supra* note 58.

⁸⁹ Nazir-Ali, *supra* note 11 at 37-38. See also SPELLMAN, *supra* note 57 at 166 (discussing government campaign against the church).

⁹⁰ SPELLMAN, *supra* note 57 at 166-167. See also *Kilīsāy Qadīmī Prūtistān Tavasūṭ Vizārat Eṭilā'āt Ta'īl Va Yīk Kishīsh Bi Zindān Evin Muntaqil Shud [The Old Protestant Church Was Shut Down by the Ministry of Intelligence and a Pastor Was Transferred to Evin Prison]*, Center for Human Rights in Iran (formerly: International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran) (May 31, 2013), available at https://persian.iranhumanrights.org/1392/03/mansour_borji/ (discussing the closure of Assembly of God congregations in Arak, Mashhad, Shiraz, Ahvaz, and Tabriz).

⁹¹ SPELLMAN, *supra* note 57 at 167.

⁹² Borji, *supra* note 58.



The Assembly of God Church's leaders (unknown date). Mohammad-Bagher Yousefi is the first from the left. Hossein Soodmand is next to him in the first row. Bishop Haik Hovsepian-Mehr is the fourth person in the first row. Soodmand was executed on the charge of apostasy. Yousefi and Hovsepian-Mehr were murdered under suspicious circumstances.

3.3. Movement of House Churches

Christian converts congregate in unofficial churches, called house churches, to avoid government restrictions. Some reports indicate the house churches' movement is a fast-growing phenomenon in Iran.⁹³ The Iranian government, however, claims that house churches are illegal as they have not obtained the necessary permits from the authorities and their establishment is "unnecessary" because there are already churches in the country and Christians have not "requested permission to build new churches."⁹⁴ The majority of house churches do not exist over the long term and have to change their locations frequently.⁹⁵

The Church of Iran, also known as *Kilīsāy-e Piyghām*, is a non-denominational house church.⁹⁶ Similar to other house churches, members of the Church of Iran have been subjected to harassment, surveillance, discrimination, and arbitrary detention. According to Pastor Khanjani, twelve members of the Church of Iran are currently behind bars.⁹⁷ In an interview with IHRDC, Nazli Mokarian, from the Church of Iran, described Christian converts' difficulties in having

⁹³ Fred Petrossian, *The Birth of a Minority: Iranian Christians*, Article 18 (Feb. 8, 2019), <https://articleeighteen.com/analysis/2867/>. See also MARK BRADLEY, TOO MANY TO JAIL; THE STORY OF IRAN'S NEW CHRISTIANS 142-159 (2014) (discussing the growth of house churches in Iran).

⁹⁴ Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, HRC, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/31/69 (May 26, 2016) (by Ahmed Shaheed).

⁹⁵ Danish Immigration Service, Update on the Situation for Christian Converts in Iran (June 2014) 21, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1038385/1226_1403600474_rapportiranffm10062014ii.pdf

⁹⁶ Luiza Oleszczuk, *3 Christian Pastors in Iran to Be Imprisoned? Ministry Warns of Increased Persecution*, The Christian Post (Nov. 30, 2011), <https://www.christianpost.com/news/3-christian-pastors-in-iran-to-be-imprisoned-ministry-warns-of-increased-persecution-63536/print.html>

⁹⁷ Witness Statement of Behrouz Sadegh Khanjani, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (Nov. 13, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3xonm6m>

access to the Bible and other Christian literature in Persian.⁹⁸ Christian converts also cannot attend state-recognized churches, because their service is not in Persian, and they are closely monitored by security forces.⁹⁹

The situation of home churches worsened after former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took power.¹⁰⁰ In 2006, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution was empowered to implement policies aimed at confronting deviant groups disguising themselves as mystical and spiritual movements.¹⁰¹ The government's major aggression, however, came after the speech of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in October 2010.¹⁰² He stated that the enemies of Islam were intent to undermine religion in the society, and for this reason, they promote debauchery and immorality, false mysticism, Baha'ism, and house churches.¹⁰³

His speech unleashed a wave of condemnation against house churches. A number of Shi'a clerics and government officials claimed house churches were designed by Western powers and Zionists to disturb the country's peace and tranquility, and that they deviate from "original" Christianity.¹⁰⁴ Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani, a prominent senior Shi'a cleric, warned security officials to take more serious actions against Christians' proselytizing, as they misguide the youth, even in Qom.¹⁰⁵ Morteza Tamadon, the governor of Tehran Province at the time, also compared evangelical Christians to Sunni extremists and the Taliban.¹⁰⁶

During subsequent years, religious charges, such as apostasy, gave way to charges related to acting against national security.¹⁰⁷ State news outlets also developed a campaign to portray Christian converts and house churches as outsider cults with no official recognition in Iran.¹⁰⁸ They tried to dehumanize the Christian convert community as sectarians, agents of the

⁹⁸ Witness Statement of Nazli Mokarian, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (Apr. 27, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2U45UGC>

⁹⁹ VAN GORDER, *supra* note 9 at 178.

¹⁰⁰ Ahmadinejad called for "a halt to the growth of Christianity in Iran." See Landinfo - Country of Origin Information Center, *supra* note 7 at 19.

¹⁰¹ Elzām Shūrāay Farhang 'umūmī Bi Pīygirī Rāhkār Hāay Jilūgirī Āz Burūz Va Zuhūr Āfrād, Tashakul Hā Va Ānjumlah Hāay Inhīrafī Bā Pūshish Masa'il 'irfānī Va Ma'navī [Requiring the Public Culture Council to Follow Up the Strategies Aimed at Preventing the Emergence of Deviant Individuals, Association, and Groups Disguising [Themselves] as Mystical and Spiritual], Tehran 1385 [2006], <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/101282>

¹⁰² *Hukm Marg Barāay Nūkīshān Masīhī Va Vahshat Āz Gustarish Taghyr Dīn [Death Sentence for Christian Converts and the Fear of Spreading Change of Religion]*, VOA Persian (Mar. 5, 2012), <https://ir.voanews.com/persiannews/iran-islam-christianity-religion-convert-141444753>

¹⁰³ *Bayānāt Dar Ijtīmā' Buzurg Mardum Qom [Remarks in the Large Congregation of People in Qom]*, Khamenei.ir (Oct. 19, 2010), <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/print-content?id=10302>

¹⁰⁴ "Kilīsā Hāay Khānīgī" Barnāmiḥ Şahyūnist Hāst ["House Churches" are the Zionists' Plan], JavanOnline.ir (Oct. 23, 2010), <https://bit.ly/38hMwZJ>. See also Vazīr Eṭīlā'āt: *Tablīgh Masīhīyat Dar Miyān Danish Amūzān Kishvar; Prūzhih Jadīd Dushman Dar Jang Narm [The Ministry of Intelligence: Propagation of Christianity Among Students in the Country; The Enemy's New Project in Soft Warfare]*, AsrIran.com (Aug. 9, 2010), available at <https://bit.ly/2Kqce6a> (discussing the claims of Heydar Moslehi, the Minister of Intelligence at the time, about evangelizing Iranian students with the slogan of "Jesus only").

¹⁰⁵ *Hushdār Shadīd al-Laḥn Āyatullāh Vahid Khorasani [Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani's Severe Warning]*, Entekhab.ir (Mar. 9, 2011), <https://bit.ly/3ataCDr>

¹⁰⁶ *Iran: Christian Pastor Faces Execution for 'Apostasy;'* Evangelical Christians Targets of Religious Persecution, Human Rights Watch (Sept. 30, 2011), <https://bit.ly/2PfCceJ>

¹⁰⁷ Borji, *supra* note 58.

¹⁰⁸ *EIKO Confiscates Church Property in Karaj*, Article 18 (Mar. 9, 2018), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/2854/>

imperialists, and Zionists.¹⁰⁹ Although former President Hassan Rouhani created a new position in his government called Special Assistant to the President of Iran for Ethnic and Religious Minorities' Affairs, repression of Christian converts did not diminish.¹¹⁰

Christian converts are subjected to systematic discrimination, particularly in criminal, family, and inheritance matters. Among other things, they cannot have marriage ceremonies in church and officially record their Christian marriage. Similarly, they cannot hold Christian funeral services.¹¹¹

3.4. Prohibition of Service in Persian and Closure of Churches

In recent years, Evangelical Persian-language churches either were shut down by the authorities or had to limit their operations significantly. The leaders of these churches were under pressure for years to submit the names and information of their members to security officials.¹¹² They were told to either leave the country or their posts, or they were threatened with consequences ranging from long imprisonment to harm to their loved ones.¹¹³

Security officials took over the management of the Episcopal Church to prevent the attendance of Christian converts.¹¹⁴ In February 2012, Hekmat Salimi, a Christian convert and the pastor of St. Paul's Church in Isfahan, was arrested.¹¹⁵ The authorities had ordered the leaders of St. Paul's Church to prevent the attendance of Persian-speaking members who were not born Christians.¹¹⁶ After 70 days in prison, Hekmat Salimi, who had been charged with promoting Christianity, was released on bail.¹¹⁷ There is no reporting on the outcome of this case.

Similarly, agents of the Ministry of Intelligence ("MOI") asked Nasrollah Sharifian, also a Christian convert and the priest for St. Luke's Church in Isfahan, to submit the names and information of church members. Rev. Ashrafi, the pastor of St. Simon the Zealot's Church in

¹⁰⁹ Botji, *supra* note 67.

¹¹⁰ *Naqdī Bar 'amalkard Va Sukhānān Dastyār Rayīs Jumhūr Dar Omūr Āqvām Va Aqaliyathā [A Critique of the Performance and Statements of the Special Assistant to the President for Ethnic and Religious Minorities' Affairs]*, kurdpress.com (Jan. 10, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3fu3yYW>

¹¹¹ *Nigāhī Bi Kushār Masīhīyān Dar "Jumhūrī Eslāmī" Va E'māl Fishār Bar Masīhīyān Fārs Zabān [A Look at the Massacre of Christians in the "Islamic Republic" and the Pressure on Persian-speaking Christians]*, IranKargar.com (Oct. 6, 2019), <https://bit.ly/2N7Ovoj>

¹¹² Denis Azhiri, *Fishār Vizārat Etilā'āt Bar Kilīsāy Jamā'at Rabbānī Tehran [The Ministry of Intelligence's Pressure on the Jamā'at Rabbānī Church in Tehran]*, Radio Farda (May 16, 2012), <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f10-iran-ntelligence-ministry-asks-for-name-and-information-of-church-members/24583028.html>

¹¹³ Botji, *supra* note 58.

¹¹⁴ *Hāzf Barnāmih Rīzī Shudih Rahbarān Kilīsā Hāy Iran Tavasūf Sipāh [The Planned Elimination of the Leaders of Iranian Churches by the IRGC]*, IranBriefing.net (June 10, 2013), <https://farsi.iranbriefing.net/?p=27729>

¹¹⁵ *Kishīsh Kilīsāy Isfahan Bāzdāsh Shud [The Pastor of the Isfahan Church Was Arrested]*, HRANA (Feb. 23, 2012), <https://www.hra-news.org/2012/hranews/1-10248/> See also *Dasgīrī Kishīsh Kilīsāy Polis Qidīs Isfahan [Arrest of the Pastor of St. Paul's Church in Isfahan]*, BBC Persian (Feb. 24, 2012), available at https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2012/02/120224_123_arested_iranian_christian_priest_isfahan (discussing that St. Paul's Church is affiliated with the Episcopal Church).

¹¹⁶ Mansour Borji, *Nigāhī Bi Vāz 'iyat Masīhīyān Iran Dar Sāl 2013 [A Look at the Situation of Christians in Iran in 2013]*, Radio Farda (Dec. 25, 2013), <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f10-iranian-christians-2013/25211330.html>

¹¹⁷ IranBriefing.net, *supra* note 114.

Shiraz, was also threatened with the permanent closure of the church so that he would comply with security forces' orders. Due to these intimidation tactics, many Christian converts no longer attended church services.¹¹⁸

The leaders of the Assembly of God Church and the Presbyterian Emmanuel Church were forced to halt their Friday services in 2009 and 2013, respectively.¹¹⁹ Friday is the official weekend in Iran; therefore, it was more convenient for churches to hold worship services on this day. In 2012, the Presbyterian Emmanuel Church and St. Peter's Evangelical Holiness Church, both located in Tehran, were also told to stop their services in Persian.¹²⁰ Even the bookstores inside the churches were shut down.¹²¹ Those bookstores offered the Bible and Christian literature in Persian. The authorities did not want Christian literature to be accessible to the public. Currently, teaching and publishing Bible and other Christian literature in Persian is prohibited.¹²²



Bibles in Persian

The leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Tehran were also threatened and forced to terminate the church service in Persian.¹²³ In 2013, Persian-speaking Christians and the people who have not been baptized were banned from entering Catholic St. Abraham's Church in Tehran. The security officials had threatened the church's bishop with not renewing his visa and

¹¹⁸ *Id.*

¹¹⁹ *Tehran Pastor Arrested During Church Service*, Article 18 (May 21, 2013), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/3415/>

¹²⁰ *Mamnū 'īyat Irā'ih Khadamāt Bi Zabān Fārsī Dar Kilīsā Hāay Irānī [Prohibition of Providing Services in Persian in Iranian Churches]*, Radio Farda (Feb. 26, 2012), available at https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f12_iran_bans_persian_services_in_tehran_churches/24496338.html

¹²¹ Mansour Borji, *Guzārishī Āz Vaz'īyat Masīhīyān Iranī Dar Sāl 2012 [Report on the Situation of Iranian Christians in 2012]*, Radio Farda (Jan. 2, 2013), https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f3_iranian_christians_2012/24814135.html

¹²² Nazi Azima, *Masīhīyat Dar Iran: Jurm Sīyāsī-Āmnīyātī [Christianity in Iran: A Political Security Crime]*, VOA Persian (Jun. 23, 2012), available at <https://ir.voanews.com/arshyw/iranian-converts-christianity-increase-house-churches-threat-islam>

¹²³ Borji, *supra* note 116.

expelling him from the country immediately if Persian-speaking Christians continued to attend the church.¹²⁴

Between 2009 to 2014, all Assyrian Protestant churches that had services in Persian were shut down by the MOI.¹²⁵ The Pentecostal congregation in the Tehran neighborhood of Shahr-Ara was closed in 2009.¹²⁶ The Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Kermanshah was also shut down in 2010.¹²⁷ This church was not very active before the closure because its old building, which is a nationally registered cultural heritage monument, needed to be repaired, but the officials did not allow it.¹²⁸ As a result of such restrictions, not only Persian-speaking Christian converts, but also a group of ethnic Christians who are not fluent in Armenian and Assyrian languages have been deprived of their right to worship in the language of their choice.¹²⁹

Similarly, the Assembly of God churches were closed, one after another, because of government concern about the increasing number of Persian-speaking Christian converts. In 2009, two Assembly of God churches in Shahin Shar, Isfahan Province, and Urmia, West Azerbaijan Province, were shut down.¹³⁰ Edison Gharibian, who was serving in the Shahin Shahr Church, and the pastor who was in charge of the Urmia Church, were banned from continuing their ministries.¹³¹

In 2011, security forces raided the Christmas celebration in the Assembly of God congregation in Ahvaz and arrested all attendees, including children. Many of arrestees were soon released.¹³² The church, however, was shut down indefinitely.¹³³ The Revolutionary Court in Ahvaz

¹²⁴ *Mamnū 'īyat Vūrūd Masīḥīyān Fārsī Zabān Bi Kilīsāy Katūlic Lātīn Tehran [Banning Persian-speaking Christians from Entering the Tehran's Latin Catholic Church]*, HRANA (Oct. 1, 2013), <https://www.hra-news.org/2013/hranews/1-15277/>. St. Abraham's Church belongs to the Dominican province of Ireland. See *St. Abraham's, Tehran*, Dominicans.ie, <https://dominicans.ie/about/communities/tehran/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

¹²⁵ Nilofar Rostami, *Farzand Yik Kishīsh Āshūrī Maḥkūm Bi Zindān: Hīch Madrakī 'alayih Pidaram Va Baqīyih Ā'zāyī Khānivādīhām Vujūd Nadārad [The Daughter of an Assyrian Pastor Sentenced to Imprisonment: There Is No Evidence against My Father and Other Members of My Family]*, IranWire (Aug. 4, 2019), <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/32370>

¹²⁶ *Tā' yīd Chahār Ḥukm Dar Dādgāh Tajdīd Nazar: Maḥkūmiyat Hāay Falihīyy Barāy Masīḥīyān Tavasūṭ Dādgāh Enqīlāb [Upholding Four Sentences in the Court of Appeals: Mass Convictions for Christians by the Revolutionary Court]*, Center for Human Rights in Iran (formerly: International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran) (Aug. 27, 2018), <https://persian.iranhumanrights.org/1397/06/approval-of-four-judgments-in-the-appeals-court/>

¹²⁷ Farzad Foroughi, "Shikanjih Wilson Issavi, Kishīsh Kilīsāy Āshūrī" [Torture of Wilson Issavi, the Pastor of the Assyrian Church], Radio Farda (Mar. 5, 2010), https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f3_priest_torture_Iran/1975786.html

¹²⁸ Keyvandokht Ghahari, *Āfzāyīsh Fishār Bar Jāmī'ih Masīḥīyān Iran [Increasing Pressure on the Christian Community in Iran]*, Deutsche Welle Persian (Feb. 22, 2010), <https://bit.ly/2WL3VED>. See also *Kilīsāy Pinṭī Kāstī, Kermanshah [Pentecostal Church, Kermanshah]*, IranDeserts.com (Feb. 3, 2012), available at <https://bit.ly/38BVMlg> (discussing that the Assyrian Protestant Church in Kermanshah is a nationally registered cultural heritage monument).

¹²⁹ Rostami, *supra* note 125.

¹³⁰ *Bāzdāshṭ Kishīsh Kilīsāy Jamā'at Rabbānī Isfahan [Arrest of the Pastor of the Jamā'at Rabbānī Church in Isfahan]*, HRANA (Dec. 26, 2010), <https://www.hra-news.org/2011/hranews/1-5083/>. Starting from 1993, the churches in Urmia were not allowed to have more than one service per week. See Ikelisa.com, *supra* note 86.

¹³¹ IranBriefing.net, *supra* note 114.

¹³² *Ahvaz Christians Arrested Ahead of Christmas*, Article 18 (Dec. 27, 2011), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/4064/>

¹³³ *Pastor's Wife Shahnaz Jizan Released from Prison*, Article 18 (Jan. 28, 2014), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/4069/>

sentenced the church pastor, Farhad Sabokrouh, his wife, Shahnaz Jizan, and two other leaders of the church, Nasser Zamen-Dezfuli and Davoud Alijani, to one year's imprisonment each. They had been charged with disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic through propagation of evangelical Christianity.¹³⁴ After Sabokrouh was released from prison, he and his family were forced to relocate from Ahvaz to Tehran. He was also banned from continuing his ministry in the church.¹³⁵ He fled the country with his wife after they were reportedly threatened with execution for apostasy.¹³⁶

In 2012, the Assembly of God Church in the Tehran neighborhood of Jannat Abad was officially ordered to discontinue its operation.¹³⁷ IRGC intelligence agents informed Robert Gagtapih, the Assyrian pastor of the Persian-language church, that the government will confiscate the church building if he does not comply with the order.¹³⁸ The Central Assembly of God congregation in Tehran, which was the last Persian-language Assembly of God Church, was shut down in May 2013. Before that, Robert Assyrian, the church pastor, had been arrested.¹³⁹ Currently, there are twenty active and semi-active churches in Tehran.¹⁴⁰ None of them have service in Persian. They are closed not only to Christian converts, but also to the general public.¹⁴¹

3.5. Targeting Church Leaders

Since the early years of the Islamic Republic, Protestant church leaders who proselytized among Muslims were under pressure from the government to terminate their church activities. Consequently, some of the experienced and effective church leaders left the country. In addition, the government shut down Christian seminaries and ended opportunities for basic leadership

¹³⁴ *Chahār Sāl Zindān Barāy Kishīsh Va Si Tan Āz Khādīmān Kilīsāy Ahvaz [Four Years' Imprisonment for the Pastor and Three Leaders of the Ahvaz Church]*, HRANA (Oct. 29, 2012), <https://www.hra-news.org/2012/hranews/1-12719/>

¹³⁵ *Hamsar Kishīsh Kilīsāy Jamā'at Rabbānī Ahvaz Bi Šurat Mashrūt Āzād Shud [The Wife of the Minister of the Jamā'at Rabbānī Congregation in Ahvaz Was Released Conditionally]*, Bciran.org (Jan. 29, 2014), <https://bit.ly/3aQ6Iou>

¹³⁶ *Iranian Pastor and Wife Fled After Threat of Execution for Apostasy*, Article 18 (Nov. 28, 2018), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/2303/>

¹³⁷ *Eṭilā'āt Sipāh Kilīsāy Jannat Ābād Rā Ta 'īl Kard [IRGC Intelligence Closed Down the Jannat Abad Church]*, Radio Farda (June 9, 2012), https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f3_security_forces_shutdown_church_iran/24608930.html This church was operated as a branch of the Central Assembly of God Church in Tehran but had an independent ministry. See Center for Human Rights in Iran, *supra* note 68.

¹³⁸ Center for Human Rights in Iran, *supra* note 68. See also *Kilīsāy Jannat Ābād Dar Tehran Pulump Shud [Jannat Abad Church in Tehran Was Closed and Sealed]*, PeykeIran.com (June 8, 2012), available at <https://www.peykeiran.com/Content.aspx?ID=49024> (discussing that this church had service in the Persian-language).

¹³⁹ Center for Human Rights in Iran, *supra* note 90.

¹⁴⁰ *Kilīsā Va Aqaliyathā [Churches and Minorities]*, Tehran Municipality (Oct. 15, 2014), <https://web.archive.org/web/20141015045308/http://www.tehran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=166> In 2009, there were 25 registered churches in Tehran, belonging to Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant denominations. See Landinfo - Country of Origin Information Center, *supra* note 7 at 5.

¹⁴¹ Melika Khachatorian, *Chand Sā'at Dar Khīyābān Ādyān Tehran; Vūrūd Musalmānān Mammū' [Several Hours in the Religions' Street in Tehran; Muslims Are Not Allowed to Enter]*, IranWire (Aug. 22, 2020), <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/40476>

training in the country. The people who received training outside the country were also prosecuted. As a result, the leadership of Protestant churches was undermined.¹⁴²

Under these circumstances, the Christian converts who joined the clergy paid a heavy price for their faith. It is almost certain that the status of Bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, as a former Muslim, contributed to the unprecedented repression of the Episcopal Church by the Islamic Republic.¹⁴³ At least five Christian converts and members of the clergy have been murdered under suspicious circumstances. That is, in addition to those who were charged with apostasy, the charge that cost Hossein Soodmand's life.

In recent years, more Christian converts, including church leaders, were accused of acting against national security and disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic, instead of religious offenses, such as apostasy.¹⁴⁴ Farshid Fathi, a Christian convert and house church leader, was accused of "having a high-rank position in foreign organizations in Iran and providing financial resources for those organizations," and was sentenced to six years' imprisonment in April 2012.¹⁴⁵ Before being indicted, Fathi was held in prison for about a year, five months of which was in solitary confinement.¹⁴⁶

Similarly, Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad, a Christian convert and pastor of the Church of Iran, was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in October 2019 on the charge of "congregation and collusion with intent to disrupt national security."¹⁴⁷ He, however, was also charged with capital offenses. In 2014, Haghnejad, alongside Reza Rabbani and Behnam Irani, both Christian converts and house church leaders, were charged with *moharebeh* (waging war against God) and *fesad-e fel-arz* (sowing corruption on earth), which are punishable by death.¹⁴⁸ These charges, however, were later dropped.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴² Borji, *supra* note 67.

¹⁴³ VAN GORDER, *supra* note 9 at 181.

¹⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, *supra* note 106.

¹⁴⁵ *Āzādī Zūd Hingām Kishīsh Farshid Fathi; Va 'dihīy Ki Mohaqiq Shud [Early Release of Pastor Farshid Fathi; A Promise That Was Fulfilled]*, Human Rights in Iran (Dec. 22, 2015), <https://bit.ly/3nUfHsl>

¹⁴⁶ Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons' Atlas], Farshid Fathi's profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/fa/prisoner/1094/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

¹⁴⁷ Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons' Atlas], Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad's profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/en/prisoner/1885/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021). In the same case, eight members of the Church of Iran, who had been arrested with Haghnejad, each were sentenced to five years' imprisonment in 2019. See *9 Nū Kīsh Masīhī Dar Iran Majmū'an Bi Tahamul 45 Sāl Zindān Maḥkūm Shudand [9 Christian Converts in Iran Were Sentenced to 45 Years Imprisonment in Total]*, VOA Persian (Dec. 20, 2019), <https://ir.voanews.com/latestnews/iran-human-rights-358>

¹⁴⁸ Mitra Shojaee, *Etiḥām "Muḥāribih Bā Khudā Va Fisād Fīl Ārz" Barāy Si Kishīsh Irānī [Charges of Moharebeh and Corruption on Earth against Three Iranian Ministers]*, Deutsche Welle Persian (Sept. 17, 2014), <https://bit.ly/35YZjQo>

¹⁴⁹ *Dādgāh Si Kishīsh Zindānī Dar Iran Barguzār Shud [The Trial of Three Imprisoned Pastors Was Held in Iran]*, Radio Zamaneh (Oct. 3, 2014), <https://www.radiozamaneh.info/179639> The Court of Appeals acquitted Reza Rabbani and ordered his release in December 2014. See Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons' Atlas], Reza Rabbani's profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/fa/prisoner/1893/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

Behnam Irani has a record of several arrests for church activities. In 2007, he was sentenced to five years' suspended imprisonment on the charge of "acting against national security."¹⁵⁰ In 2010, he was arrested again and sentenced to one year's imprisonment on the charge of "disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic," in addition to the suspended five years that became enforceable.¹⁵¹

The Assyrian and Armenian pastors who evangelize non-Christians have also been targeted by the Islamic Republic. In February 2010, Wilson Issavi, the pastor of the Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Kermanshah, was arrested. According to his wife, Issavi was tortured and threatened with execution. He was accused of proselytizing Muslims.¹⁵² After 54 days in prison, he was released on bail.¹⁵³ There is no reporting on the outcome of this case. Issavi, however, was told that he cannot reopen the Pentecostal Church under the pretext of promoting Christianity among Persian-speaking Muslims.¹⁵⁴

Another Assyrian church leader, Victor Bet-Tamraz, was also forced to quit his position in the Pentecostal Assyrian Church in the Tehran neighborhood of Shahr-Ara after he refused to stop church service in Persian.¹⁵⁵ Bet-Tamraz was arrested during a Christmas celebration in 2014 and spent 65 days in solitary confinement.¹⁵⁶ He was charged with "acting against national security by organizing and conducting house churches." His wife, Shamiram Issavi, was also charged with "acting against national security" as a church member.¹⁵⁷ They were sentenced to long-term imprisonment, but they left Iran before being sent to prison in September 2020.¹⁵⁸

In July 2012, IRGC intelligence agents raided the Evangelical Presbyterian Emmanuel Church in Tehran. They ordered the church pastor, Matavos (also known as Sergey) Shaverdian who is of Armenian descent, and other members of the church to leave the premises immediately. IRGC agents stated that the church's license was revoked, and church service was no longer allowed.¹⁵⁹ About two months earlier, Mehrdad Sajadi and Forough Dashtianpour, both Christian converts

¹⁵⁰ Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons' Atlas], Behnam Irani's profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/fa/prisoner/1482/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

¹⁵¹ *Behnam Irani Pas Āz Shish Sāl Tahamul Habs Āzād Shud [Behnam Irani Was Released After Serving Six Years in Prison]*, FCNN.com (Oct. 18, 2016), <https://fcnn.com/?p=1764>

¹⁵² Foroughi, *supra* note 127.

¹⁵³ *Āzādī Mūvaqat Zindānī Masīhī "Kishīsh Wilson Issavi" Bā Sipurdan Vaṣīqih* [Temporary Release of the Christian Prisoner, Pastor Wilson Issavi, by Posting Bail], HRANA (Mar. 30, 2010), <https://www.hranews.org/2010/hranews/keshish/>

¹⁵⁴ Azima, *supra* note 122.

¹⁵⁵ *Rahbar Sābiq Kilīsāy Āshūrī Pinīkāsī Tehran Bāzdāsht Shud [The Former Leader of the Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Tehran Was Arrested]*, Radio Farda (Dec. 28, 2014), <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/o2-church-iran-arrested/26766548.html>

¹⁵⁶ *Victor Bet-Tamraz Reflects on 10-year Sentence That Forced Him Out of Iran*, Article 18 (Sept. 25, 2020), <https://articleeighteen.com/features/6893/>

¹⁵⁷ *Court Sentences Four Christians to a Total of 45 Years in Prison*, Article 18 (Jul. 5, 2017), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/1877/>

¹⁵⁸ *Tā' yīd Hukm 50 Sāl Zindān Barāy Panj Shahrvand Masīhī Irānī [Upholding 50 Years' Imprisonment Sentence for Five Iranian Christian Citizens]*, Radio Farda (Aug. 19, 2020), <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-confirm-verdicts-christians-50-years-prison/30792193.html>

¹⁵⁹ IranBriefing.net, *supra* note 114.

and servants of the Emmanuel Church, had been arrested.¹⁶⁰ Only after Pastor Shaverdian stepped down from his position, security officials allowed the church to resume its activities, but under more control and restrictions.¹⁶¹

The pastors of the Assembly of God churches similarly were harassed and imprisoned. In 2004, ten church leaders were arrested during a police raid on a church meeting in Karaj.¹⁶² Pastor Leonard Keshishian, who is of Armenian descent and served at the Assembly of God Church in Isfahan, was arrested by MOI agents in December 2010.¹⁶³ He was released a month later but continued to be harassed and threatened, which forced him to leave the country in 2012.¹⁶⁴

Vruir Avanesian, another Armenian pastor of the Assembly of God Church, was arrested during the Christmas celebration in December 2012.¹⁶⁵ He was charged with “acting against national security” because of evangelical activities, and he was sentenced to three and a half years’ imprisonment. He later was released due to his severe medical conditions, but only after posting bail in cash.¹⁶⁶ Robert Assyrian, also an Armenian pastor in the Central Assembly of God Church in Tehran, was arrested in 2013.¹⁶⁷ Security forces confiscated all of his Christian books and never returned them.¹⁶⁸ According to Assyrian, his interrogations were intense, during which he figured out that his office had been wiretapped before his arrest.¹⁶⁹ He was released on bail after about 40 days.¹⁷⁰ Later on, Assyrian left the country due to continuous intimidation by Iranian authorities.¹⁷¹

3.6. Mass Arrests and Imprisonment of Christian Converts

Throughout the past four decades, Christian converts have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. Considering the Islamic Republic’s pattern in suppressing detainees and their

¹⁶⁰ Kambiz Tavaana, *Bāzdāshṭ Yik Zūj Nu Kīsh Masīhī Dar Iran [Arrest of a Christian Convert Couple in Iran]*, Radio Farda (June 6, 2012), https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f3_two_christians_arrested_in_iran/24605420.html

¹⁶¹ IranBriefing.net, *supra* note 114. Some reports indicate that Pastor Shaverdian resigned because of government pressure to limit the church service to only one day per week. See Borji, *supra* note 116.

¹⁶² *80 Naḡar, Āz Jumliḡ 10 Kishīsh, Dar Hujūm Nīrūy Entizāmī Jumhūrī Eslāmī Bi Girdihamā’ī Kilīsāy Jamā’at Rabbānī Dar Karaj Bāzdāshṭ Shudand [80 People, Including 10 Pastors, Were Arrested During a Raid by the Islamic Republic’s Police Force on an Assembly of the Jamā’at Rabbānī Church in Karaj]*, Radio Farda (Sept. 12, 2004), <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/324026.html> One of the arrestees was Pastor Henry Manokian who later went to Turkey to avoid government pressure, but passed away in exile. See *Kishīsh Hanry Āz Rahbarān Kilīsāy Jamā’at Rabbānī Dar Ghurbat Nazd Khudā Shitāft [Pastor Henry, One of the Leaders of the Jamā’at Rabbānī Church, Passed Away in Exile]*, Mohabat News (Dec. 30, 2016), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=14854>

¹⁶³ HRANA, *supra* note 130

¹⁶⁴ IranBriefing.net, *supra* note 114.

¹⁶⁵ Mansour Borji, *Āzādī Kishīsh Avanesian Bā Qiyd Vaṡīqih [Pastor Avanesian’s Release on Bail]*, Radio Farda (Jan. 10, 2013), https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f3_avanesian_jailed_pastor/24821620.html

¹⁶⁶ *Yādmān Zindih Yād Kishīsh Vruir Avanesian/ Šidāst Ki Mīmānad [The Memorial of Late Reverend Vruir Avanesian/ Voice Would Last Forever]*, Human Rights in Iran (Dec. 1, 2017), <https://bit.ly/2Xho3yu>

¹⁶⁷ Article 18, *supra* note 119.

¹⁶⁸ Borji, *supra* note 67.

¹⁶⁹ *IRAN: This Is My Plan*, VOM Radio (Dec. 12, 2020), <https://www.meek.ly/news/vomradio/iran-this-is-my-plan>

¹⁷⁰ Robert Assyrian, *Āz Rahbarān Kilīsāy Jamā’at Rabbānī Tehran, Āzād Shud [Robert Assyrian, One of the Leaders of the Jamā’at Rabbānī Church in Tehran, Was Released]*, Radio Farda (Jul. 3, 2013), https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f12_priest_robert_aserian_freed_jail_tehran/25035538.html See also VOM Radio, *supra* note 169 (discussing Assyrian’s release on bail).

¹⁷¹ VOM Radio, *supra* note 169.

families, it is likely that the actual number of arrestees is more than the publicly available figure.¹⁷² After the closure of the churches that had service in Persian and systematic exclusion of new converts from state-recognized churches, Christian converts started attending house churches, which soon became the target of security forces.¹⁷³

The number of raids carried out by security forces increases on occasions such as Christian holidays.¹⁷⁴ In one of these raids, the children who were in the Christmas celebration of the Assembly of God congregation in Ahvaz were taken into custody.¹⁷⁵ In another incident, a 78-year-old woman was arrested at her home because of her affiliation with St. Luke's Church in Isfahan.¹⁷⁶ In a number of cases, all members of a Christian family were apprehended.¹⁷⁷ Many first-time arrests led to continued persecution and intimidation, including close surveillance and risk of re-arrest and imprisonment if they engage in any Christian activity.¹⁷⁸

Judges usually imposed excessive amounts of bail.¹⁷⁹ These amounts were forfeited on some occasions, as a number of those detained or charged in court choose to flee the country, knowing they were very unlikely to receive a fair trial.¹⁸⁰ In some cases, even after posting the bail, the detainee was not released and remained in prison for extended periods of time.¹⁸¹ Recent reports indicate that security forces confiscated Christian converts' properties and anything that they found to be related to Christian activities, including cell phones, books, cars, and homes.¹⁸²

According to Hormoz Shariat, from the televangelist network of Iran Alive Ministries, arrested Christians often were not indicted and did not have access to an attorney during their detention.¹⁸³ Those awaiting trial usually faced an exhausting legal process that takes several

¹⁷² Azima, *supra* note 122.

¹⁷³ Kian Sabeti, *Āfzāyīsh Fishār Bar Shahrvandān Masīhī Va Va 'dih Hāay Hasan Rouhani [Increasing the Pressure on Christian Citizens and Hassan Rouhani's Promises]*, Radio Zamaneh (Oct. 29, 2013), <https://www.radiozamaneh.info/106510>

¹⁷⁴ Azhiri, *supra* note 112.

¹⁷⁵ *Muṣāhibih Bā Saman Kamvar Dar Khuṣūṣ Āfzāyīsh Ravand Sarkūb Masīhīyān [Interview with Saman Kamvar about the Growth of Repression of Christians]*, HRANA (Mar. 3, 2012), <https://www.hra-news.org/2012/hranews/1-10326/>

¹⁷⁶ *Tadāvūm Barkhūrd Bā Shahrvandān Masīhī Dar Isfahan [Continuation of the Encounter with Christian Citizens in Isfahan]*, HRANA (Feb. 26, 2012), <https://www.hra-news.org/2012/hranews/1-10270/>

¹⁷⁷ *Dastgīrī Hāay Khānivādīgī Nū Kīshān Masīhī Dar Iran [Family Arrests of Christian Converts in Iran]*, FCNN.com (Nov. 29, 2016), <https://fcnn.com/?p=2055>

¹⁷⁸ Hadi Asgari, Shamiram Issavi, Victor Bet-Tamraz and Amin Afshar-Naderi, Article 18 (Apr. 8, 2019), <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/case-studies/4619/> See also Borji, *supra* note 67 (discussing continuous persecution of arrestees).

¹⁷⁹ *Āzādī Mūvaqat Nū Kīsh Masīhī Dar Tab 'īd "Ebrahim Firouzi" Ba Qarār Vaṣīqih [Temporary Release of a Christian Convert in Exile, "Ebrahim Firouzi," on Bail]*, Mohabat News (Feb. 28, 2021), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=44195> See also *Unprecedented Bail Demand for Iranian-Armenian House-Church Leader*, Article 18 (Jul. 23, 2020), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/6496/> (discussing a case of excessive bail).

¹⁸⁰ Article 18, *supra* note 178.

¹⁸¹ *Tadāvūm Bāzdāshht Va Bilā Taklīfī Joseph Shahbazian Shahrvand Masīhī Dar Zindān Evin [Continuation of Detention and Uncertainty about Joseph Shahbazian, a Christian Citizen, in Evin Prison]*, Human Rights in Iran (Aug. 21, 2020), <https://humanrightsinir.org/jozefshahbazian/>

¹⁸² Borji, *supra* note 67.

¹⁸³ Azima, *supra* note 122. See also *Iran Alive Ministries*, Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, <https://www.ecfa.org/MemberProfile.aspx?ID=36403> (Last visited Jul. 30, 2021) (discussing that Iran Alive

years, during which they remained in limbo.¹⁸⁴ The majority of Christian converts received warnings and threats against any further church activity after they served their prison sentence or were temporarily released.¹⁸⁵

The Islamic Republic has cracked down on those ethnic Christians who proselytized Muslims or had connections with Christian converts from Islam. In August 2013, Sevada Aghasar, an Iranian-Armenian Orthodox Christian, was arrested alongside Ebrahim Firouzi and Masoud Mirzaei, both converts from Islam. Aghasar was charged with “congregation and collusion with intent to disrupt national security” and was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment.¹⁸⁶ After serving half of his sentence, he was granted conditional release, provided he should not evangelize Muslims.¹⁸⁷

In addition, the Iranian government does not tolerate church activities by dual nationality Christians and arrested a number of them in past years. The Islamic Republic does not recognize dual citizenship and generally does not permit foreign countries to provide protective services for detained dual citizens. Pastor Vahik Abrahamian, an Iranian-Dutch citizen of Armenian descent, was arrested in 2010 in Hamedan, along with his wife and two Christian converts. Abrahamian was accused of proselytizing Muslims but was released after about one year.¹⁸⁸

In September 2012, Pastor Saeed Abedini, who is a U.S. citizen and an Iranian Christian convert, was arrested in Tehran by IRGC intelligence agents. He had gone there to continue a humanitarian effort he began years ago to build an orphanage in Rasht.¹⁸⁹ Abedini was charged with “acting against national security” and was sentenced to eight years’ imprisonment. This accusation was levelled against him primarily because of his earlier work to set up house churches.¹⁹⁰ According to Pastor Abedini, he was severely beaten by interrogators, which caused severe injuries to him. He was also held in solitary confinement for a while and then was placed in a ward in which several inmates, who self-identified themselves as members of Al Qaeda, threatened his life.¹⁹¹ In January 2016, Pastor Abedini was released from prison, alongside

Ministries was founded in 2002 in the United States. This televangelist network is focused on church planting among Muslim Iranians).

¹⁸⁴ HRANA, *supra* note 175.

¹⁸⁵ Article 18, *supra* note 178.

¹⁸⁶ *Sivādā Āghāsār, Shahrvand Masīhī Āz Zindān Evīn Āzād Shud [Sevada Aghasar, a Christian Citizen, Was Released from Evin Prison]*, HRANA (Jul. 22, 2019), <https://www.hra-news.org/2019/hranews/a-21131/>

¹⁸⁷ ‘Now I Know Even Innocents Can Be Jailed’ – *Sevada Aghasar After His Conditional Release*, Article 18 (Jul. 22, 2019), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/4298/>

¹⁸⁸ *Held 359 Days: Vahik Abrahamian*, PrisonAlert.com, <https://www.prisoneralert.com/209> (Last visited Jul. 30, 2021).

¹⁸⁹ Lisa Daftari, *American Pastor Imprisoned Without Notice of Charges While Visiting Family in Iran*, Fox News (Dec. 19, 2012), <https://www.foxnews.com/world/american-pastor-imprisoned-without-notice-of-charges-while-visiting-family-in-iran>

¹⁹⁰ *Hamsar Sa’id ‘ābidīnī: Hamsaram Dar Zindān Tahdīd Bi Marg Shudih Āst [Saeed Abedini’s Wife: My Husband Was Threatened with Death in Prison]*, Radio Farda (Aug. 15, 2014), https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f35_iran_abedini_death_threat/26531674.html

¹⁹¹ *Kishīsh Irānī Āmrīkāīyy: Dar Irān Shikanjih Shudam [Iranian American Priest: I Was Tortured in Iran]*, Deutsche Welle Persian (Mar. 27, 2016), <https://bit.ly/37iflVY>

several other Iranian American citizens, in exchange for seven Iranians who were convicted of violating sanctions against Iran.¹⁹²

In recent years, an increasing number of Christian converts were charged with acting against national security and disseminating Zionist propaganda. In 2016, a group of Christian converts were arrested at a house church in Rasht. Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, Mohammad-Reza Omid, Mohammad-Ali Mosayebzadeh, and Saheb (Zaman) Fadaei were tried at Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran. They each sentenced to ten years' imprisonment on the charge of acting against national security through "founding a house church" and "promoting" what is called "Zionist Christianity."¹⁹³ All defendants, except Pastor Nadarkhani, also received flogging sentences for drinking Communion wine.¹⁹⁴ During a raid on another house church in 2016, several Christian converts, including Naser Navard Goltapeh and three citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan, were taken into custody.¹⁹⁵ Similarly, they were charged with acting against national security through conducting a house church and "propagation of Zionist Christianity," and each were sentenced to ten years' imprisonment.¹⁹⁶ In the second half of 2020, at least 35 Christian converts were arrested in different cities, many of whom were charged with acting against national security through "propagation of Zionist Christianity."¹⁹⁷

Judge Mashallah Ahmadzadeh, the former head of Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, has handed down severe prison and internal exile sentences to members of the Christian Convert community, including Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani and Naser Navard Goltapeh. Christian converts who have passed through his court reported being mistreated and disrespected by Judge Ahmadzadeh.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Eugene Scott & Daniella Diaz, *2016ers Hail Release of U.S. Prisoners Held by Iran as Republicans Slam Obama Policy*, CNN (Jan. 16, 2016), <https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/16/politics/iran-prisoners-jason-rezaian-saeed- Abedini-amir-hekmat/index.html>

¹⁹³ *Youcef Nadarkhani Va Si Masīhī Dīgar Har Kudām Bi 10 Sāl Habs Maḥkūm Shudand [Youcef Nadarkhani and Three Other Christians Were Each Sentenced to 10 Years' Imprisonment]*, Radio Farda (July 13, 2017), <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/o2-four-iranian-christians-were-sentenced/28613508.html> The court of appeals later reduced Nadarkhani and Fadaei's sentences to six years' imprisonment. The sentence of Mohammad-Reza Omid was also commuted to two years in prison. See *Ejra'iyyi Hukm 80 Zārbih Shalāq Zamān Fādāei Nū Kīsh Masīhī [Execution of 80 Lashes Punishment for Zaman Fadaei, a Christian Convert]*, HARANA (Nov. 17, 2020), <https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-27498/>

¹⁹⁴ *Second Christian Convert Flogged for Drinking Communion Wine*, Article 18 (Nov. 16, 2020), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/7326/>

¹⁹⁵ Older Ghorbanov, Youcef Farhadov, and Bahram Nasibov are members of the Word of Life Church in Baku, Azerbaijan. They were extradited to their home country after about four months of detention in solitary confinement in Iran. See *Rad Darkhāst Āzādī Mashrūṭ Nāsir Navard Gultapih, Nū Kīsh Masīhī Maḥbūs Dar Zindān Evīn [Rejection of Parole for Naser Navard Goltapeh, Imprisoned Christian Convert in Evin Prison]*, HRANA (Jul. 14, 2021), <https://www.hra-news.org/2021/hranews/a-30949/>

¹⁹⁶ Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons' Atlas], Naser Navard Goltapeh's profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/en/prisoner/2646/> (Last visited Jul. 30, 2021).

¹⁹⁷ *Važ īyat Nū Kīshān Masīhī Dar Iran "Bīsyār Tahdīd Āmīz" Āst [The Situation of Christian Converts in Iran is "Very Threatening"]*, Deutsche Welle Persian (OCT. 8, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3qPomxn>

¹⁹⁸ Claire Evans, *Judge Ahmadzadeh Singles Out Christians in Court*, persecution.org, <https://www.persecution.org/2019/02/12/judge-ahmadzadeh-singles-christians-court/> (Last visited Jul. 30, 2021). See also *Qāzī Fāsīd Māshāāllāh Āḥmadzādīh "Māshīn Emzāīyy Nahād Hāay Āmnīyatī" Āz Qazāvāt Bar Kinār Shud [The Corrupted Judge Mashallah Ahmadzadeh, [Known as] the Signing Machine for Security Forces, Was Removed from the Bench]*, shabtabnews.com (Jan. 14, 2019), <https://bit.ly/2VsV3Gm> (discussing Judge Ahmadzadeh's ties with security forces and his removal from the Revolutionary Court).

Several Christian converts are currently in prison or in exile, and many more are awaiting trial. Ebrahim Firouzi began serving his exile sentence in Sistan and Baluchistan Province in November 2019.¹⁹⁹ He had been arrested in March 2013 and sentenced to one-year imprisonment and two years of internal exile on the accusation of disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic. He was supposed to get released in January 2015, but instead he was retried on the charge of “acting against national security” through church activities.²⁰⁰ Judge Mohammad Moghiseh, the then head of Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, sentenced him to five years’ imprisonment. In February 2021, Firouzi was arrested again after releasing videos detailing his harassment by security forces.²⁰¹

In the most recent case, Sara Ahmadi and Homayoun Zhaveh, a Christian convert couple, were tried at Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, presided over by Judge Iman Afshari.²⁰² They were charged with “administering and membership in a group with the intention of disturbing national security,” which refers to their activities in a house church. In November 2020, the couple were sentenced to eleven years and three years’ imprisonment, respectively.²⁰³ The court of appeals reduced Sara’s sentence to eight years. Recently, they were summoned to Evin prison to begin their imprisonment. Zhaveh suffers from advanced Parkinson’s disease.²⁰⁴

The government’s harassment of Christian converts has not been limited to arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. In 2008, a Christian convert couple were threatened with losing the custody of their child because of their church activities.²⁰⁵ In September 2020, the Bushehr Court of Appeals ruled to separate a two-year-old toddler from her Christian parents. Maryam Fallahi and Sam Khosravi, a Christian convert couple, adopted Lydia when she was three months old. The court argued that because the child was born to Muslim parents, her custody cannot be given to non-Muslims. The court order was contrary to the fatwas of Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi and Ayatollah Saanei who stated that giving the custody of this child to a Christian couple is permissible.²⁰⁶

¹⁹⁹ *Ebrāhim Fīrūzī BI Dādsarāy ‘umūmī Va Enghilāb Sarbāz Eḥzār Shud [Ebrahim Firouzi Was Summoned to the Public and Revolutionary Prosecutor’s Office in Sarbaz]*, HRANA (Feb. 8, 2021), <https://www.hra-news.org/2021/hranews/a-28741/>

²⁰⁰ *After Years in Prison and Exile, Ebrahim Firouzi Cleared of New Charges*, Article 18 (Sept. 29, 2020), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/6938/>

²⁰¹ Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons’ Atlas], Ebrahim Firouzi’s profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/fa/prisoner/1403/> (Last visited Jul. 30, 2021).

²⁰² *Sārā Āhmadi Va Humāyūn Zhāvīh, Nū Kīshān Masīhī Jahat Taḥamul Habs Eḥzār Shudand [Sara Ahmadi and Homayoun Zhaveh, both Christian Converts, Were Summoned to Serve Their Imprisonment]*, HRANA (Mar. 26, 2021), <https://www.hra-news.org/2021/hranews/a-29421/>. See also Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons’ Atlas], Iman Afshari’s profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/en/judge/566/> (Last visited Jul. 30, 2021) (discussing the performance of Afshari as the head of Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran since 2018).

²⁰³ HRANA, *supra* note 202.

²⁰⁴ *Sara Ahmadi and Homayoun Zhaveh*, Article 18 (June 9, 2021), <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/case-studies/8834/>

²⁰⁵ *Guzārishī Āz Jafā, Āzār Va Āzyathā Nisbat Bi Hamvaṭānān Masīhī Dar Sāl 2008 [Report on the Persecution and Harassment against Christian Compatriots in 2008]*, Melliiun Iran (Jan. 7, 2009), <https://melliun.org/hambast/ha09/01/07hoghugh.htm>

²⁰⁶ *Dādghāh Tajdīd Nazar Būshīhr Ḥukm Judāīyy Farzand Khāndīh 2 Sālīh Masīhī Rā Sādir Kard [The Bushehr Court of Appeals Ruled in Favor of the Separation of the Christian Couple’s 2-year-old Adopted Child]*, HRANA (Sept. 24, 2020), <https://www.hra-news.org/2020/hranews/a-26751/>

4. Cases of Extrajudicial Murder

During the past four decades, at least nine Protestant church leaders were murdered or died under suspicious circumstances. Although the Islamic Republic blamed an opposition group for a few of these murders, no clear investigation was conducted, and no one was held accountable for other cases. The families of the victims were denied access to justice, and some of them even were intimidated and harassed. In the following section, the details of these murders will be discussed.

4.1. Arastoo Sayyah

Only a week after the 1979 revolution, Anglican priest Arastoo Sayyah was murdered in his church office in Shiraz. The perpetrators cut the blood vessel on his neck, and left a bullet next to his body, showing that they had the opportunity to shoot him but chose the other way. Following his murder, Sayyah's family was forced to flee the country to Europe.²⁰⁷ In the turmoil after the 1979 revolution, they had no way to seek justice in Iran. The assailants were never identified, and no charges were filed by the government.²⁰⁸

4.2. Bahram Dehqani-Tafti

In May 1980, Bahram Dehqani-Tafti, son of Bishop Dehqani-Tafti, was abducted and shot to death in a deserted area near Evin prison in Tehran. The authorities had already seized his passport to prevent his travel outside the country so that his father would hand over access to a pension fund belonging to employees of the Episcopal Church's schools and hospitals.²⁰⁹ "They took his passport as they couldn't take mine, and killed him instead of me," Bishop Dehqani-Tafti later said.²¹⁰ Bahram Dehqani-Tafti's murder has remained unsolved until the present day.

4.3. Haik Hovsepian-Mehr

Bishop Haik Hovsepian-Mehr was the Superintendent of the Central Assembly of God Church in Tehran and the Chairman of the Council of Protestant Ministers in Iran at the time of his murder.²¹¹ Hovsepian-Mehr, a 48-year-old Armenian, had resisted the government's demand to stop proselytizing and allowed Muslim citizens to attend church services.²¹² Later on, he became an outspoken advocate of Mehdi Dibaj, another pastor of the Assembly of God Church, who was incarcerated and sentenced to death on the charge of apostasy.²¹³

²⁰⁷ *Remembering Rev. Arastoo Sayyah, 40 Years After His Murder*, Article 18 (Feb. 19, 2019), <https://articleeighteen.com/analysis/2907/>

²⁰⁸ Some reports indicate that two members of the Islamic Propagation Society [*Ānjuman Tablīghāt Islāmī*] in Shiraz committed the murder. See Goudarzi, *supra* note 77.

²⁰⁹ *Bahram Dehqani-Tafti, Murdered Son of First Ethnic Iranian Anglican Bishop*, Article 18 (May 6, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3pYyYsZ>

²¹⁰ HASSAN DEHQANI-TAFTI, *THE HARD AWAKENING* 82-3 (1981).

²¹¹ VAN GORDER, *supra* note 9 at 222. The Council of Protestant Ministers was established by the six leading Protestant churches, including the Assembly of God Church, in 1986. The churches were located in Tehran and have proselytized amongst Muslims. See Landinfo - Country of Origin Information Center, *supra* note 7 at 9.

²¹² SANASARIAN, *supra* note 55 at 74.

²¹³ *Iran: Official Secrecy Hides Continuing Repression*, Amnesty International (May 30, 1995) 9, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/176000/mde130021995en.pdf> See also Iran: Fear for the Lives of

Hovsepian-Mehr issued a public statement listing human rights violations suffered by members of the evangelical Christian community in Iran.²¹⁴ He also invited UN officials to come to Iran and investigate violations of religious freedom.²¹⁵ In January 1994, Bishop Hovsepian-Mehr reportedly refused to sign a declaration, prepared by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, stating that his denomination fully enjoys the rights guaranteed by the Iranian Constitution.²¹⁶ On January 19, 1994, Haik Hovsepian-Mehr was abducted on his way to Tehran's Mehrabad International Airport. A few days earlier, Mehdi Dibaj had been released from prison.²¹⁷ After about twelve days, during which Hovsepian's family were not aware of his whereabouts, his body was found with 26 stab wounds to his chest. Before that, Hovsepian-Mehr had received several threats to his life.²¹⁸

According to official reports, police discovered his body in Shahr-e Rey, a Tehran suburb, and immediately buried him in a Muslim cemetery, because they allegedly were not able to identify the body.²¹⁹ Several days later, Joseph Hovsepian recognized his father from one photograph that was shown to him.²²⁰ After that, the body was disinterred and reburied in the Christian cemetery. According to Gilbert Hovsepian, the unusual irregularities in the process of investigation pointed to gross negligence or an intentional cover-up by the Islamic Republic government.²²¹

The Hovsepian family did not file a complaint. They, however, were subjected to harassment and intimidation afterward, which has continued in some forms until the present day.²²² They currently live outside Iran. Gilbert Hovsepian was 17 years old at the time of his father's murder. He was later threatened and beaten several times and forced to sign a paper to not evangelize. He even was imprisoned for more than a month because of his religious activities.²²³

My sister, who was attending university at that time, was told that if she talks about our father, she will be expelled from the university. My older brother was serving his [mandatory] military conscription [at that time]. [They] changed his place of service and harassed him. A year later, I also went to [mandatory] military conscription, during which I was beaten and imprisoned several times ...

Church Leaders: Rev. Mehdi Dibaj, Rev. Tatavous Michaelian, Amnesty International (Jul. 5, 1994), available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE13/007/1994/en/> (discussing that Mehdi Dibaj had been sentenced to death on the charge of apostasy).

²¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *supra* note 11 at 17.

²¹⁵ Ikelisa.com, *supra* note 86. See also Joseph Hovsepian & Andreh Hovsepian, *A Cry from Iran*, YouTube (May 1, 2020), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLeKQz4tuDo> (discussing the invitation of Professor Reynaldo Galindo Pohl).

²¹⁶ *One Person's Story: Haik Hovsepian-Mehr*, Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran, <https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/12863/haik-hovsepian-mehr> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

²¹⁷ Amnesty International, *supra* note 213 at 8-9.

²¹⁸ *Iran: From Misery to Ministry*, VOM Radio (Jun. 30, 2015), <https://www.vomradio.net/episodes/detail/iran-from-misery-to-ministry> (downloaded using SoundCloud).

²¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, *supra* note 11 at 17. According to Gilbert Hovsepian, it was hard to believe that the police were unable to identify his father, as he had a cross necklace around his neck, a Bible, and his ID card in his pocket. See E-mail from Gilbert Hovsepian, in response to email correspondence, (Dec. 2020), (on file with IHRDC).

²²⁰ Amnesty International, *supra* note 213 at 8.

²²¹ E-mail from Gilbert Hovsepian, in response to email correspondence, (Dec. 2020), (on file with IHRDC).

²²² VOM Radio, *supra* note 218. See also E-mail from Gilbert Hovsepian, in response to email correspondence, (Nov. 2020), (on file with IHRDC) (discussing the threats that he received outside of the country).

²²³ VOM Radio, *supra* note 218.

On the first day of my service, I was told that if I say anything [about my father], I will be shot and killed ‘accidentally’ during the training. MOI [agents] didn’t do anything directly, but once in a while, [they] scared us in some way. Once, for instance, [somebody] had written insults on the walls [of our home]. Another time, [somebody] had broken our car’s windows on the street ... [In addition,] our phones were tapped.²²⁴

4.4. Mehdi Dibaj

Mehdi Dibaj, a Christian convert and pastor in the Assembly of God Church, was first arrested in 1983 and detained for about two months because of alleged slandering of Ayatollah Khomeini.²²⁵ In 1984, he was arrested again and held in Sari prison for the next nine years, two years of which were in solitary confinement.²²⁶ Never indicted officially for any crime, Dibaj was tortured and subjected to mock executions during his detention.²²⁷ The government also accused Dibaj of committing adultery with his own wife and based on that issued a divorce to his wife.²²⁸ In 1993, Dibaj was sentenced to death by a Revolutionary Court in Sari on the charge of apostasy, reportedly because of his conversion from Islam to Christianity more than four decades before.²²⁹ Following an international outcry about his case, Dibaj was released from prison in January 1994.²³⁰ The charge against him, however, was never dropped.²³¹

On June 20, 1994, Dibaj disappeared. Nothing was heard about his whereabouts until July 5, 1994, when police reported finding his body in a park west of Tehran.²³² He had been stabbed multiple times in his chest.²³³ The Iranian government’s news agency, IRNA, quoted a police statement that the body was found during the investigations into the murder of Armenian pastor Tateos Michaelian, and later was identified by Dibaj’s relatives.²³⁴ The authorities denied his family’s request for an independent autopsy.²³⁵

The Islamic Republic later stated that several members of the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) had committed the murder.²³⁶ The government then staged a trial during which the defendants

²²⁴ E-mail from Gilbert Hovsepian, in response to email correspondence, (Nov. 2020), (on file with IHRDC). More than two decades after Bishop Hovsepian-Mehr’s death, the government propaganda apparatus is still preoccupied with him. See *Āmūzishgāh Kitāb Muḡhadas Iran (Ākmā) – Bakhsh Āval [Iran’s Bible School (AKMA) – First Section]*, Feraghvaadyan.com (Apr. 23, 2017), <https://bit.ly/2LmaKtV>

²²⁵ *25 Years Since Extrajudicial Killing of ‘Apostate’ Mehdi Dibaj*, Article 18 (June 24, 2019), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/4189/>

²²⁶ Amnesty International, *supra* note 213 at 9.

²²⁷ Article 18, *supra* note 225.

²²⁸ SANASARIAN, *supra* note 55 at 124.

²²⁹ Amnesty International, *supra* note 213 at 9. See also SANASARIAN, *supra* note 55 at 124-125.

²³⁰ Article 18, *supra* note 225.

²³¹ Amnesty International, *supra* note 213 at 9.

²³² Human Rights Watch, *supra* note 11 at 17.

²³³ Article 18, *supra* note 225.

²³⁴ Amnesty International, *supra* note 213 at 9.

²³⁵ Human Rights Watch, *supra* note 11 at 17.

²³⁶ The Mojahedin-e Khalq is an opposition group that engaged in armed resistance against the Iranian government. Thousands of its members and sympathizers were executed during the 1988 massacre of political prisoners in Iran. This organization denied any involvement in the murder of Christian pastors.

confessed to complicity in the murder of the Christian pastors and having a plan to kill a few more.²³⁷ Despite this, those behind Dibaj's murder were never identified.²³⁸

4.5. Tateos Michaelian

Tateos Michaelian, the senior pastor of the Armenian Evangelical Church of St. John, assumed the chairmanship of the Council of Protestant Ministers after the murder of Hovsepian-Mehr.²³⁹ Michaelian, an Armenian Christian, had previously directed the Presbyterian Synod and the Bible Society.²⁴⁰ On June 29, 1994, Michaelian disappeared. His family looked for him everywhere. Four days later, his son identified his body in a morgue.²⁴¹ A part of his head had been shot away.²⁴² A note was on his body that led the police to the place of Dibaj's corpse.²⁴³

A few weeks before his murder, Michaelian had reached an agreement with Elam Ministries to participate in a project of translating the Bible into Persian.²⁴⁴ Michaelian was an outspoken advocate against the persecution of the evangelical Christian community, particularly the members of the Christian clergy. Before his murder, he had received several death threats, to the extent that his family was terrified for his safety.²⁴⁵

After initial silence, the government introduced three young women as the perpetrators.²⁴⁶ They stated that they were members of MEK, and allegedly intended to make the Iranian government look bad internationally.²⁴⁷ Farahnaz Anami, Batoul Vaferi Kalateh, and Maryam Shahbazpoor were placed on trial together in the Revolutionary Court in March 1995.²⁴⁸ Since the beginning, the manner in which the prosecution was conducted created serious doubts about the validity of government's claims. As Mariet Michaelian, daughter of Tateos Michaelian, described, her family members were called to act as witnesses in the trial, which was open to the public.²⁴⁹

²³⁷ Borji, *supra* note 58.

²³⁸ *The Cost of Faith Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran*, Center for Human Rights in Iran (formerly: International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran) (2013) 19, https://www.iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/Christians_report_Final_for-web.pdf

²³⁹ Amnesty International, *supra* note 213 at 9. *See also* Human Rights Watch, *supra* note 11 at 17 (discussing Tateos Michaelian's position in St. John Armenian Evangelical Church).

²⁴⁰ 'My Brother Found Him ... in the Morgue' – 25 Years Since Tateos Michaelian's Murder, Article 18 (Jun. 25, 2019), <https://articleeighteen.com/features/4200/>

²⁴¹ Amnesty International, *supra* note 213 at 9.

²⁴² Felix Corley, *Obituary: Tateos Michaelian*, The Independent (July 6, 1994), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-tateos-michaelian-1412187.html>

²⁴³ Sabeti, *supra* note 173.

²⁴⁴ *25 years on: Remembering Rev. Tateos Michaelian*, Elam.com (Jul. 24, 2019), <https://www.elam.com/Iran30/25-years-remembering-rev-tateos-michaelian>

²⁴⁵ Article 18, *supra* note 240.

²⁴⁶ *Id.* The Islamic Republic government later claimed that MOI agents detected and nullified a plan for the assassination of Bishop Iraj Mottahedeh and Dimitry Bellos, both affiliated with the Episcopal Church in Isfahan. *See Kashf Tūṭī 'ih Munāfiqīn Barāy Qatl Osquf Iraj Mottahedeh Va Dimitry Pelos [Detecting the Conspiracy of Monafeghin to Assassinate Bishop Iraj Mottahedeh and Dimitry Bellos]*, IRNA News Agency (Jul. 8, 1994), <https://bit.ly/3mWisrL>

²⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch, *supra* note 11 at 18.

²⁴⁸ Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Implementation of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief: Visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran, CHR, U.N. Doc. E/CN.4/1996/95/Add.2 (Feb. 9, 1996) (by Abdelfattah Amor).

²⁴⁹ Article 18, *supra* note 240.

[They asked,] ‘Do you accept that these people killed him? And do you want us to sentence them?’ ... But we knew that they didn’t do it. I knew that they were themselves victims because back in those days they used to have these *mujahideen* [members of the Mojahedin-e Khalq] cooperate with them, promising them that they would have a lesser sentence ... So, I told them that I know that God is the best judge, so I give everything to Him; let him judge the one who killed my dad.²⁵⁰

Farahnaz Anami confessed to her complicity in the murder of Tateos Mikaelian. Two other women were tried because of planting bombs in Muslim shrines in Qom and Tehran. They were sentenced to imprisonment ranging from 10 to 20 years.²⁵¹

4.6. Mohammad-Bagher Yousefi

Mohammad-Bagher Yousefi, also known as Ravanbakhsh, was a Christian convert who served as a minister in the Assembly of God Church in Mazandaran Province.²⁵² Some reports indicate that the authorities had warned him many times, saying that he should stop evangelizing.²⁵³ In September 1996, his body was found hanging from a tree.²⁵⁴ His wife, Akhtar Rahmanian, described that his family went through a difficult time afterward.

[The police] called our home and said that he has had an accident ... [H]is car was still at home. How could he have had an accident[?] [They] said, ‘Come to Savadkouh prosecutor’s office’ ... When we arrived there, they said, ‘Your husband has committed suicide’ ... [They] went and brought a piece of paper ... A note was written saying that I have a family problem and I am dissatisfied with my life, and I want to commit suicide! ... Then, [they] pressured me that, ‘You [must] come and confess that you had a problem with your husband and an argument took place and he went into a state of anger and committed suicide. I refused and did not accept their request ... When [they] didn’t get any result, [they] pressured me, [saying] that, ‘You [must] file a lawsuit against the [Assembly of God] Church, [claiming that they] have deceived [you] ... In return, we will find a suitable job for you, which you need.’ On the other hand, [they] pressured my husband’s family to sue me. All efforts were made to make us accept this was a suicide.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰ *Id.*

²⁵¹ Human Rights Watch, *supra* note 11 at 18. *See also* Amor, *supra* note 248 (discussing the Special Rapporteur’s interview with three convicts in Evin prison, during which they admitted their guilt and claimed that the MEK had orchestrated the murders).

²⁵² *Qatl Nū Kishān Masīhī Pas Āz Enqilāb [Murder of Christian Converts After the Revolution]*, Peace-mark magazine (Oct. 7, 2013), <https://www.peace-mark.org/ghatle-nokishane-masihi-pas-az-enghelab>

²⁵³ *Nimūnihiyy Barjastih Āz Yik Imāndār Masīhī [An Outstanding Example of a Christian Believer]*, Iranian Christian Foundation, <https://bit.ly/3bY5SGI> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

²⁵⁴ *Religious Minorities*, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1997/iran/Iran-05.htm> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

²⁵⁵ Goudarzi, *supra* note 77.

According to Akhtar Rahmanian, later on a person named Judge Mohammadzadeh, who introduced himself as the IRGC envoy, threatened her and her mother-in-law to sign a document indicating that they had no complaint. An autopsy was also performed, but the body was not given to the family and, instead, was buried by security forces in Tehran. The pressure and intimidation against the Ravanbakhsh family continued for years until they could leave the country.²⁵⁶ There is no evidence of a thorough investigation into the murder of Mohammad-Bagher Ravanbakhsh, and until the present time, no one has been held accountable.

After the revelations about the Chain Murders of Iranian intellectuals and political opponents during the 1990s, the names of four Christian pastors were also mentioned among the victims of a group of MOI agents who allegedly killed them without official authorization.²⁵⁷

4.7. Manuchehr Afghani, Ghorban Dordi Tourani, and Abbas Amiri

In addition to the aforementioned murders, there are several other suspicious deaths that the Iranian Christian community perceives as assassinations carried out by the state.²⁵⁸ Manuchehr Afghani, a Christian convert in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, was killed in Isfahan in 1988. Some reports indicate that Afghani's murder was linked to his activities to establish a house church in Isfahan. The assailants were never identified, and no charges were filed by the government.²⁵⁹

In 2005, Ghorban Dordi Tourani, a Christian convert and house church leader, was stabbed to death in front of his home.²⁶⁰ A few hours after his body was found, police raided his home and confiscated Bibles and other Christian books. They also went to the homes of the people known to be Christian and threatened them.²⁶¹ Tourani was allegedly tortured before his death.²⁶² About a week before his murder, Tourani had been summoned by religious leaders in his hometown of Gonbad Kavous, in Golestan Province, and was told that this was his last chance to return to Islam.²⁶³ Those behind his murder, however, were never identified.

²⁵⁶ Iranian Christian Foundation, *supra* note 253.

²⁵⁷ Kambiz Fattahi, *Kishīsh Nadarkhani; Hazīnih Hāay Yik I'dām Ehtimālī [Pastor Nadarkhani; The Costs of a Possible Execution]*, BBC Persian (Sept. 30, 2011), https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2011/09/110930_u02_u01_nadarkhani

²⁵⁸ Borji, *supra* note 58.

²⁵⁹ Goudarzi, *supra* note 77. Some reports indicate that he was not a member of the Christian clergy. See *Iran: Information on Instances of Prosecution for Apostasy, of Muslim Converts to Christianity, Who Do Not Become Members of the Clergy; and on Their Treatment by the Authorities and Society*, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (May 1, 1988), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6abb248.html>

²⁶⁰ *Freedom of Religion or Belief World Report 2012*, Human Rights Without Frontiers International, <http://hrwf.org/images/reports/2013/forbannualreport.pdf> 12 (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

²⁶¹ *Guftār Rūz: Mukhātīrih Barāy Āghaliyat Hāay Mazhabī Dar Iran [Word of the Day: The Peril for the Religious Minorities in Iran]*, VOA Persian (Dec. 8, 2005), <https://ir.voanews.com/persiannews/31-2005-12-08-voa3-61690347>

²⁶² Peace-mark magazine, *supra* note 252.

²⁶³ *Ghorban Dordi Tourani; Qurbānīyān Shikanjih Va Marg Hāay Mashkūk Dar Jumhūrī Islāmī [Ghorban Dordi Tourani; Victims of Torture and Suspicious Deaths in the Islamic Republic]*, Balatarin (Feb. 18, 2019), <https://www.balatarin.com/permlink/2019/2/18/5040853>

In 2007, Mohammad Jaberi and Ali Jafarzadeh, both Christian converts and members of house church congregations, were also killed under suspicious circumstances.²⁶⁴ There is no report indicating that an investigation has ever been done about their deaths.

In July 2008, security forces raided the home of Abbas Amiri and his wife Sakinah Rahnama, both Christian converts residing in Isfahan. The elderly couple hosted a house church in their home.²⁶⁵ A group of attendees were arrested, and Abbas Amiri and his wife were severely beaten by security forces.²⁶⁶ After being in a coma for three days, Abbas Amiri died because of the injuries he sustained during the raid.²⁶⁷ He was an Iran-Iraq War injured veteran.²⁶⁸ Several days later, his wife also died, reportedly because of “injuries under torture.”²⁶⁹ The authorities did not allow the couple’s relatives to hold any kind of memorial or funeral services.²⁷⁰ There is no reporting that those security forces who had used excessive force against them were identified or disciplined.

5. Cases of Apostasy

In the following section, the cases of Christian converts who were charged with apostasy, which is punishable by death, will be discussed in detail.

5.1. Hossein Soodmand

Hossein Soodmand is the only Christian convert who has been executed on the charge of apostasy.²⁷¹ He joined the Assembly of God Church in the 1970s and later became the assistant pastor of the church in Isfahan. After the 1979 revolution, Soodmand started a new congregation of the Assembly of God Church in Mashhad. The authorities initially allowed him to host church services in his home. In 1989, they told him that the house church must be closed. Soodmand, however, continued to meet with his congregation in secret, and was regularly detained and usually released after a few days. In October 1990, Soodmand was arrested and held in solitary confinement for about a month.²⁷² The authorities threatened him to recant his Christian faith and stop his ministry.

²⁶⁴ Suuntaus Project - Finnish Immigration Service, *supra* note 6.

²⁶⁵ Sabeti, *supra* note 173.

²⁶⁶ Mellian Iran, *supra* note 205. *See also* Iranian Couple Dies from Police Attack, Baptist Press (Aug. 7, 2008), available at <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/iranian-couple-dies-from-police-attack/> (discussing the physical attack to Abbas Amiri and his wife).

²⁶⁷ Sabeti, *supra* note 173.

²⁶⁸ Azima, *supra* note 122.

²⁶⁹ International Federation for Human Rights, Discrimination against Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Iran (July 2010) 25, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4c8622f72.pdf>

²⁷⁰ Iranian House Church Leader and Wife Die after Police Raid, VOM Canada (Aug. 6, 2008), <https://www.vomcanada.com/ir-2008-08-06.htm>

²⁷¹ *One Person’s Story: Hossein Sudmand*, Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran, <https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/41705/hossein-sudmand> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

²⁷² *30 Years Since Iranian Christian Convert Hanged for ‘Apostasy,’* Article 18 (Dec. 3, 2020), <https://articleeighteen.com/features/7500/>

He was arrested for the last time a few weeks later.²⁷³ According to Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran at that time, Hossein Soodmand was charged with “apostasy from Islam, propagating Christianity, distributing Christian literature, and setting up an illegal church.” On December 3, 1990, he was hanged in Mashhad prison. It is not clear that he had a trial at all, as there is no information publicly available in this regard.²⁷⁴

Soodmand family found out about his death after other senior church leaders were summoned to court in Mashhad.²⁷⁵ His body had already been buried in an unmarked grave in an area reserved for “the cursed,” which refers to apostates and opponents of the Islamic Republic. This area is situated outside the Mashhad cemetery.²⁷⁶ More recently, it was reported that his unmarked grave was bulldozed.²⁷⁷

As Arian Soodmand described, her father informed the family that their home and phone were tapped. Shortly after his execution, the authorities seized the telephone line, which was associated with the church, and did not allow the family to get another number. For several years, Hossein Soodmand’s wife, who is legally blind, used to go to the MOI office with Arian, who was a young child at that time.²⁷⁸

Because my mother did not believe that my father had been executed and was asking [them] to release him. [The MOI agents] were saying, with complete composure, ‘Hey! We executed him. He was an apostate and we executed him!’ They always said the same thing ... My mother was asking [one of the MOI agents], ‘Why did you execute him?’ [He] answered, ‘He could decide to not be a Christian.’²⁷⁹

The Assembly of God congregation in Mashhad continued to exist in secret, but not for long. In the aftermath of the assassination of Christian pastors in 1994 and 1996, the church activities came to an end.²⁸⁰

²⁷³ *IRAN: The Martyr’s Daughter*, VOM Radio (Jan. 12, 2019), <https://www.vomradio.net/episodes/detail/iran-the-martyrs-daughter> (downloaded using SoundCloud).

²⁷⁴ Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Third Rep. Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, CN.4, U.N. Doc. A/45/697 (Feb. 13, 1991) (by Reynaldo Galindo Pohl).

²⁷⁵ Article 18, *supra* note 272.

²⁷⁶ *IRAN: “They Couldn’t Stop My Father,”* VOM Radio (Jan. 19, 2019), <https://www.vomradio.net/episodes/detail/iran-they-couldnt-stop-my-father> (downloaded using SoundCloud).

²⁷⁷ *Iran Bulldozes over the Grave of Pastor Who Was Executed by the Regime in 1990 for Converting from Islam to Christianity*, Daily Mail (Jan. 14, 2020), <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7886833/Iran-bulldozes-grave-pastor-executed-regime-1990-converting-Islam-Christianity.html>

²⁷⁸ Mary Mohammadi, *Masīhiyān Dar Qatl Hāy Zanjīrihiy; Guftigū Bā Farzand Hossein Soodmand Radkani, Kishīsh I’dām Shudih [Christians in the Chain Murders; Interview with the Daughter of Hossein Soodmand Radkani, the Executed Pastor]*, Peace-mark magazine (Dec. 22, 2019), <https://www.peace-mark.org/104-7>

²⁷⁹ *Id.*

²⁸⁰ *Muṣāhibih Ba Kishīsh Mohammad Sepehr [Interview with Pastor Mohammad Sepehr]*, Kalameh.com, <https://bit.ly/35d0r2h> (Last Feb. 24, 2021).

5.2. Youcef Nadarkhani

Youcef Nadarkhani is a Christian convert and pastor in the Church of Iran, which is a network of evangelical Persian-language house churches. He was sentenced to death on the charge of apostasy in a lower court in Rasht in October 2009. Branch 11 of the Criminal Court of Appeals in Gilan Province upheld the death sentence in 2010.²⁸¹ Establishing that Nadarkhani was a Muslim before converting to Christianity was critical for the court.

The Iranian Supreme Court ruled that if Nadarkhani was a Muslim after the age of maturity, then the lower court must find him guilty of apostasy and issue a death sentence, but if not, then he could repent and renounce his Christianity.²⁸² The court relied on Article 167 of the Constitution and based its judgment on Shari'a jurisprudence.²⁸³ Article 167 provides that if the judge cannot find codified laws as the basis for his judgment, he should deliver his ruling on the basis of authoritative Islamic sources and reputable fatwas.²⁸⁴

Due to international pressure, however, the Iranian judiciary issued an order to the lower court to delay the apostasy verdict in December 2011.²⁸⁵ The court finally acquitted Nadarkhani of the apostasy charge; however, it found him guilty of acting against national security and sentenced him to three years' imprisonment.²⁸⁶ In 2016, Nadarkhani was arrested again, and this time was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment and two years of internal exile on the charge of "setting up an illegal group through conducting house churches." His sentence was later reduced to six years' imprisonment.²⁸⁷

5.3. Other Cases of Potential Death Penalty

In 2004, Hamid Pourmand, a lay leader in the Assembly of God Church was arrested in Bushehr.²⁸⁸ Some reports indicate that he was initially charged with apostasy, which later was dropped. He was sentenced to three years' imprisonment because of misleading his superiors in the Iranian army about his conversion from Islam to Christianity.²⁸⁹ In 2008, Mahmoud Matin-

²⁸¹ *Unprecedented Death Sentence for Christian Pastor on Charge of Apostasy*, Center for Human Rights in Iran (formerly: International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran) (Dec. 7, 2010), <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/12/khanjani-nadarkhani-apostasy/>

²⁸² *Supreme Court Says No Apostasy Execution if Pastor was Never Muslim and Repents*, Center for Human Rights in Iran (formerly: International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran) (July 26, 2011), <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/07/nadarkhani-no-execution-if-not-muslim-and-repents/>

²⁸³ Center for Human Rights in Iran, *supra* note 281.

²⁸⁴ Qanuni Assasi Jumhuri Islami Iran [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran], art. 167.

²⁸⁵ *Apostasy Verdict Delayed So Pastor Can Repent*, Center for Human Rights in Iran (formerly: International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran) (Dec. 20, 2011), <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/12/nadarkhani-delay/>

²⁸⁶ Saeed Kamali Dehghan, *Iranian Christian Pastor Released from Jail*, *The Guardian* (Sept. 8, 2012), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/08/iranian-christian-pastor-released-jail>

²⁸⁷ Atlas Zendan Haya Iran [Iran Prisons' Atlas], Youcef Nadarkhani's profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/fa/prisoner/38/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

²⁸⁸ *Vākunish Sāzmān Hāay Mudāfi' Hūghūgh Bashārī Bi Muḥākimiḥ Hamid Purmand Kishīsh Irānī [Human Rights Organizations' Reaction to the Trial of Hamid Pourmand, the Iranian Pastor]*, *Radio Farda* (Apr. 7, 2005), <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/298260.html>

²⁸⁹ *Vazīfih Masīhī (Hamid Pourmand)[A Christian's Duty (Hamid Pourmand)]*, *Kalameh.com*, <https://bit.ly/3bsed3y> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

Azad and Arash Basirat, both Christian converts in Shiraz, were also charged with apostasy. These charges were later dropped, and they were released after about four months in prison.²⁹⁰

6. Cases of Imprisonment, Torture, and Exile

In the following section, the accounts of witnesses interviewed by IHRDC will be presented to illustrate how the Islamic Republic's oppressive and discriminatory practices and policies have impacted Christian converts.

6.1. Behrouz Sadegh Khanjani

Pastor Behrouz Sadegh Khanjani is a leader of the Church of Iran, an informal network of evangelical house churches with congregations in different cities. This church, which started its activities in 1995 in Rasht, does not have any formal organizational status under Iranian law.²⁹¹ In recent years, the Church of Iran has been subjected to repression by Iranian intelligence and judiciary officials.²⁹²

In December 2006, security forces arrested fourteen members of the Church of Iran in Rasht, Karaj, and Tehran simultaneously. A number of church leaders, including Behrouz Sadegh Khanjani, were among the arrestees. The mass arrest took place before the Christmas holiday.²⁹³ Pastor Khanjani was charged with acting against national security because of his religious activities. The interrogators urged him to end church meetings as they perceived such gatherings as a threat to the ideological integrity of the Islamic Republic. After a month, he was released on bail and the charge against him was dropped. Despite this, MOI agents occasionally summoned him to their unofficial locations.²⁹⁴

In 2009, several members of the Church of Iran were arrested in different cities.²⁹⁵ Around the same time, Khanjani was summoned to Shiraz by MOI agents, and he was told he should go there if he “doesn't want to see more arrests.” He went to the MOI detention center in Shiraz, also known as Plate No. 100, where he was taken into custody. Khanjani was interrogated for hours while blindfolded and chained.²⁹⁶

According to Mahmoud Taravatravi, the attorney who represented cases of Christian converts in Iranian courts, the wife of Behrouz Sadegh Khanjani was arrested in Tehran in early 2010. Fatima Turk Kajuri, who is also a Christian convert, was initially charged with serious offenses,

²⁹⁰ Roya Karimi Majd, *Dū Irānī Masīhī Mutaham Bi Irtidād Tabra`ih Shudand [Two Iranian Christians Charged with Apostasy Were Acquitted]*, Radio Farda (Sept. 30, 2008), https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f5_two_iranian_acquited/466883.html

²⁹¹ Khanjani, *supra* note 97. See also Mokarian, *supra* note 98 (discussing the church's initiation in Rasht).

²⁹² Human Rights Watch, *supra* note 106.

²⁹³ Niusha Boghrati, “*Dastgīrī Ti`dādī Āz Masīhīyān Dar Irān*” [Arrest of a Number of Christians in Iran], Radio Farda (Dec. 17, 2006), https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f4_christian_arresting_iran/367652.html

²⁹⁴ Khanjani, *supra* note 97.

²⁹⁵ *Ghahari*, *supra* note 128.

²⁹⁶ Khanjani, *supra* note 97.

such as apostasy and insulting the sacred values of Islam, but later was released on bail.²⁹⁷ Pastor Khanjani was also released on bail after about eighty days. He believes that Christian converts endure harassment and intimidation because security officials have tried to introduce them as members of dangerous sects, and based on such allegations, the security apparatus has received a considerable budget.²⁹⁸

During my second [apprehension and] interrogation in 2009, I found out that their intended meaning of sect is something like ... a deviant sect in the United States, in which committing suicide, drinking blood, and setting the believers on fire were common practices among its members. Or also ISIS, which is a dangerous sect. The Islamic Republic was going to claim, with the help of persons like [Foreign Minister] Mohammad Javad Zarif, that those who are known as Christian converts in Iran are not Christian at all. They are very dangerous sects, which, if they were in Europe, the Western governments would also deal with them [similarly].²⁹⁹

Despite pressure from the government, Behrouz Sadegh Khanjani and Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad, another Christian convert and church leader, started a campaign to establish the identity of the children born to Christian-convert parents as born Christians in the late 2000s. They advocated that such children should enjoy the constitutional rights of ethnic Christians, including the right to Christian religious education. Hoping to find a solution, they sent inquiries to the offices of fourteen senior Shi'a clerics, including Ayatollah Montazeri and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, in 2009 and 2010.³⁰⁰

All fourteen Shi'a clerics affirmed that such children are Christian. After that, Khanjani and Haghnejad presented the fatwas to the Ministry of Education officials, demanding Christian religious education for these children in school. The officials, however, responded slowly and reluctantly. Although they admitted that the children of Christian converts should be taught the Bible in school, in at least one case in Rasht, no improvement has been made since 2010 until the present.³⁰¹

Pastor Khanjani also tried to establish the right of Persian-speaking Christians, or non-ethnic Christians, to have representation in the Iranian Parliament. In 2010, he communicated with the Parliament and the Ministry of Interior, asking the officials to set up the election process for electing a representative for Persian-speaking Christians.³⁰² His request was accepted and

²⁹⁷ Ghahari, *supra* note 128. See also *Āzādī Fāṭimih Turk Kajūrī Ba Tūdī Vasīqih [Release of Fatima Turk Kajuri After Posting Bail]*, RAHANA (Jul. 22, 2010), <https://bit.ly/3wDteYY> (discussing the release of Fatima Turk Kajuri, the wife of Pastor Khanjani, on bail in 2010).

²⁹⁸ Khanjani, *supra* note 97.

²⁹⁹ *Id.*

³⁰⁰ Javad Abbasi Tavallali, *Fishār Hukūmatī Bar Nūkīshān Masīhī [Government Pressure on Christian Converts]*, Radio Zamaneh (Oct. 9, 2019), <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/468437/>

³⁰¹ *Id.*

³⁰² *Id.*

processed initially in the Ministry of Interior but was disregarded when MOI agents arrested him for the third time.³⁰³

Pastor Khanjani described his interrogations as “inquisition.” The interrogators accused him, among other things, of deceiving senior Shi‘a clerics and taking advantage of legal loopholes, as he was successful in obtaining fourteen affirmative fatwas regarding the rights of Children born to Christian-converts and daring to ask for elective representation in the Parliament. According to him, MOI agents wanted to make interrogations as long as possible by asking absurd questions, such as “in how many days, or how many years, Noah built his Ark?” Their goal was to frame the prisoner, overwhelm the judge to rule as they dictated, and obtain more overtime pay. After eleven months, Behrouz Sadegh Khanjani was released on bail. He then left Iran to avoid further persecution.³⁰⁴

6.2. Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi

Despite coming from a Shi‘a *sadat* family, which claims descent from the Prophet Mohammad, Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi converted to Christianity to avoid the government’s “suffocating restrictions” on people’s lives, as he explained in an interview with IHRDC. He was a handicraft artist in Shiraz. He and his wife, Marzieh Rahemi, joined the Church of Iran in 2011. They have endured imprisonment, discrimination, and exile because of their affiliation with the church.³⁰⁵

The church’s weekly prayer meetings were held in members’ homes and scheduled at irregular times due to security concerns. The prayers were conducted by Vahid Roghangir, also known as Mohammad, who was a house church leader.³⁰⁶ “Brother Vahid was telling the church members that their cell phones must be turned off and make less noise. Because the number of participants was large; about fifty to sixty people. [He also was asking them] to come to the host’s home one by one, not once and all together, so that they did not cause any problem for the neighbors.”³⁰⁷

On October 12, 2012, a group of church members attended a weekly prayer meeting in the family home of Bijan Farokhpour and his wife. Around 5 p.m., MOI agents violently raided the house. They arrested seven individuals, including Bijan Farokhpour.³⁰⁸ “First of all, [they] started

³⁰³ Khanjani, *supra* note 97. See also *Hukm Bī Sābiqih I’dām Bi Etihām Irtidād Barāy Kishīsh Masīhī [Unprecedented Death Sentence for a Christian Pastor on the Charge of Apostasy]*, Center for Human Rights in Iran (formerly: International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran) (Dec. 7, 2010), <https://persian.iranhumanrights.org/1389/09/khanjani-nadarkhani-apostasy/> (discussing the details of Pastor Khanjani’s arrest and charges).

³⁰⁴ Khanjani, *supra* note 97.

³⁰⁵ Witness Statement of Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (Jan. 23, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2SvPshi>

³⁰⁶ In 2012, he was arrested during a mass arrest of church members and sentenced to six years’ imprisonment on the charges of acting against national security and disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic. See Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons’ Atlas], Mohammad Roghangir’s profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/en/prisoner/1887/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

³⁰⁷ Witness Statement of Marzieh Rahemi, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (Jan. 25, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3pZk5bl>

³⁰⁸ *Shahādatnāmih Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi [Witness Statement of Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi]*, Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons’ Atlas], <https://prisonatlas.com/testimony5/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

beating me. [Then, they] handcuffed and blindfolded me, and brutally kicked me out of the house in front of my wife and my disabled son who had a high fever,” Bijan Farokhpour said.³⁰⁹

All arrestees were transferred to the MOI detention center in Shiraz. Farokhpour was placed in a small cell with three other inmates. He often could not receive food because his interrogation sessions overlapped with the inmates’ dining time. Farokhpour was also beaten, insulted, and humiliated. The interrogators forced him to express regret for his Christian faith and plead for forgiveness.³¹⁰

[They were asking] ‘How long have you believed [in Christianity]? For what? What has been your purpose? Do you know [conversion to Christianity] is wrong? You who have left a complete religion, namely Islam, is like someone who, for instance, has a master's degree, [but] returns back and wants to start [by getting] a high school diploma ... it means you have gone backward.’ ... One or two of the interrogators, which I haven’t seen their faces, but their voices were different, were familiar with Christianity. [They] knew the Bible inside out, that is [they] explained each part of it and interpreted it in some way to claim that [leaders of] the new branches of Christianity get training in Israel somehow, [and] then [they] come to Iran to mislead [the people] from the main path.³¹¹

After about two weeks, Farokhpour was released on bail. He and other members of the Church of Iran who had been arrested with him hired an attorney to represent them in court. MOI agents intimidated their attorney to drop the case. In February 2013, their trial was held, presided over by Judge Sadaati, who was the then head of the Shiraz Revolutionary Court. The judge threatened them with long-term imprisonment and did not allow anyone to speak.³¹²

Our lawyer was the only one who spoke, and his statement was brief. He only said, ‘The Quran states: *There is no compulsion in religion.*’ The judge responded ‘Yes! We have no problem with those who have inherited their religion from their parents to be in our country. But not those who leave Islam for other faiths. We have problem[s] with them and must help them and guide them and prevent them from deviating! They are being misled and are misleading others! That is why we must stop them from now ... and their imprisonment and flogging this guy should be an example for the rest of those who like to change their religion for any reason.’³¹³

When the court entered its ruling, their attorney had to pay bribes to court staff to obtain a copy of the ruling.³¹⁴ This is because, in politically-sensitive cases, such as the prosecution of individuals who changed their religion, courts often do not provide any written orders or documents to defendants and their attorneys. Bijan Farokhpour was sentenced to three years’

³⁰⁹ Farokhpour Haghghi, *supra* note 305.

³¹⁰ *Id.*

³¹¹ *Id.*

³¹² *Id.*

³¹³ *Id.*

³¹⁴ *Id.*

imprisonment for “acting against national security” and “opposing the Islamic Republic.”³¹⁵ In addition, the judge sentenced him to fifty lashes for converting from Islam.³¹⁶ After their first attorney resigned because of pressure from MOI agents, Farokhpour, who was free on bail, retained another lawyer and appealed his sentence. Then he went to Turkey to join his family.³¹⁷

Several months later, the court of appeals reduced his prison sentence to two years and six months’ imprisonment. MOI agents started threatening Farokhpour’s attorney with revocation of his license to practice law if Farokhpour refused to return to serve his sentence. In addition, Farokhpour’s relative who had posted bail for his release was summoned by the court. Farokhpour returned to Iran to avoid burdensome consequences for his family and his attorney.³¹⁸

Bijan Farokhpour was sent to Adel Abad Prison in Shiraz. He had to sleep on the floor and was not given food during the first days of his arrival. He was informed that not only did prisoners have to pay for their medication, but also for their food, clothes, and other necessities.³¹⁹ In the majority of cases, prisoners have to pay for many of their needs out of pocket. The food given to prisoners is generally insufficient and poor in quality.³²⁰ As Farokhpour described, prisoners also did not have access to proper medical care. They could visit a doctor only once a month and were not given medications like antibiotics. He faced many difficulties getting the medication that he needed. After a while, MOI agents reached out to Farokhpour and stated that approval of his parole request was conditioned on his promise to leave the country. He signed the conditional parole and was released from prison. After that, he crossed the border to Turkey.³²¹

6.3. Marzieh Rahemi

Marzieh Rahemi is a Christian convert who currently lives with her family in exile in Turkey. Due to dissatisfaction with her inherited religion, Marzieh Rahemi and her husband, Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi, joined the Church of Iran. In October 2012, a group of MOI agents raided their home, where they hosted a prayer meeting. Several people, including her husband, were arrested.

The agents showed no warrant but searched the house and seized the tools that Rahemi’s husband was using to make traditional handicraft items. Without them, he was unable to work and earn an income. They also confiscated their family’s documents, valuable items, and attendees’ cell phones and Bibles.³²² MOI agents later returned the family documents but refused

³¹⁵ *Id.*

³¹⁶ *Id.* As explained in the report, the Islamic Penal Code does not have a provision on apostasy. The legal basis for the flogging sentence issued to Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi is unclear.

³¹⁷ Farokhpour Haghighi, *supra* note 305.

³¹⁸ *Id.*

³¹⁹ *Id.*

³²⁰ *Važ ‘iyat Ma ‘ishatī Va Ishtighāl Dar Zindān Chigūnih Āst [What is the Living and Employment Situation Like in prison?]*, Eghtesadonline.com (Feb. 3, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3khXztx>

³²¹ Farokhpour Haghighi, *supra* note 305.

³²² Rahemi, *supra* note 307.

to give back the other items, which were of sentimental value for Marzieh Rahemi and her husband.³²³

As Rahemi described, MOI agents took their own videos of the people in the house and forced them to sign a pledge stating that they will not attend any church. The agents also tore down the picture of Jesus Christ in the house. Two days later, Rahemi was summoned to Plate No.100 in Shiraz. She and a group of church members went there by themselves. Masoud Rezaei and Afsar Bahmani were arrested, but others were interrogated together.³²⁴

[A female agent] led us to the interrogation room and [asked us] to sit at a table, facing a wall. [We] no longer could see anyone and were only able to hear [their] voices ... They had already put a paper on the table. [The interrogators] said, ‘Write down all your detailed information since you were born ... How and in what form did you get to know the Church [of Iran]?’ ... [The interrogators] deliberately wanted to harass us. They, for instance, said, ‘Your Bible is a lie.’ Or ‘Do you know that the Virgin Mary was a prostitute?’ ... The humiliation of the Bible was [their way] to harass us.³²⁵

According to Rahemi, the interrogators were shouting insults at the members of the church and accused them of disguising organizational activities behind the name of the church. They were forced to recant their faith and sign a pledge stating that they will not contact their fellow Christians. Despite such intimidation, Marzieh Rahemi and her husband resumed prayer meetings in their home after a while.³²⁶

The couple also became subjected to different forms of harassment by MOI agents. Her husband’s license to work as a handicraft artist was revoked and MOI agents warned him to not resume his profession again. In addition, MOI agents threatened the clinic that was providing physical therapy to Rahemi’s disabled child so that the clinic refused to treat him.³²⁷

In 2014, a new wave of arrests began that targeted members of the Church of Iran. Vahid Roghangir and Soroush Saraei were arrested in Bandar Anzali, Mazandaran Province.³²⁸ One day before their arrest, they had met Marzieh Rahemi and her husband in Shiraz. In the aftermath of these events, Marzieh Rahemi and her son went to Turkey to avoid further persecution.³²⁹

6.4. Nazli Mokarian

³²³ Farokhpour Haghighi, *supra* note 305.

³²⁴ *Shurū ‘ Maḥkūmīyat Masoud Rezaei Dar Zindān ‘ādil Ābād Shiraz [Start of the Imprisonment of Masoud Rezaei in Adel Abad Prison in Shiraz]*, Bciran.org (Nov. 9, 2014), <https://bit.ly/3kG5IVd>

³²⁵ Rahemi, *supra* note 307.

³²⁶ *Id.*

³²⁷ Farokhpour Haghighi, *supra* note 305.

³²⁸ Soroush Saraei was the servant of the Church of Iran. He had been arrested during a mass arrest of church members in 2012. He was later sentenced to one year and four months’ imprisonment. *See* Atlas Zendan Haye Iran [Iran Prisons’ Atlas], Soroush Saraei’s profile, <https://ipa.united4iran.org/en/prisoner/1888/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

³²⁹ Rahemi, *supra* note 307.

Nazli Mokarian converted to Christianity in 1997. The strict security measures imposed on the state-recognized churches led her to join a network of house churches known as the Church of Iran. She inspired her family members to also become Christian. After that, her family started to host church meetings in their house in Karaj. As the number of people who were attending the house church grew, the pastor moved and settled in Karaj.³³⁰ Mokarian and her ex-husband, Mohammad (William) Beliad, later reached leadership positions in the Church of Iran.

Following a mass arrest of church members in 2005, Mokarian was summoned to the MOI office several times. She was insulted and interrogated about her church activities. “Multiple times, [the interrogators] in a threatening tone said, ‘If you are upset, leave the country! Why have you stayed here?’ ... [After the interrogation sessions,] indirect pressure still continued. [For instance,] our phones were always being tapped. All of our commuting and our telephone conversations were under control. Everywhere we went, we knew that [they] were chasing us.”³³¹

In 2010, a house church’s prayer meeting was raided by security forces in Shiraz. Nazli Mokarian was one of the attendees. As she described, security forces, who had disguised themselves as workers, poured into the home shortly after the meeting was started. She was not arrested that day, but two months later, MOI agents showed up at her door and tried to arrest her ex-husband without presenting any warrant. He resisted arrest, and the tension was escalated, during which Nazli Mokarian and her sister-in-law were beaten. After that, Mokarian and her ex-husband were arrested and transferred to Rajae Shahr Prison in Karaj.³³²

Mokarian was placed in an unsanitary cell and interrogated about her relationship with church members and allegations of receiving money from other countries. She was released on bail. But two days later, she joined her ex-husband in their trial in the Karaj court, where the judge behaved rudely toward them. “[The judge] turned to the [MOI] agent who was with us and said, ‘Before you went ahead and arrested them, [you] should have told me [about your plan] so that I would give you [some] narcotics to place in their house, so we would have arrested them on drug charges! This way, [we] would have peeled off their skin,’” Mokarian added.³³³

Mokarian’s ex-husband remained imprisoned and later was transferred to Adel Abad prison in Shiraz. Mokarian and her ex-husband had four co-defendants in the case against them. They were Christian converts who were arrested in different cities but their cases were sent to Shiraz. According to Nazli Mokarian, the court venue was changed due to the influence of the MOI office in Shiraz. The couple were charged with different offenses, including apostasy, insulting the sanctities of Islam, and propaganda in support of anti-government groups and organizations.³³⁴

The trial continued for one year, during which the defendants were allowed to speak only once. Mokarian and her ex-husband were accused of apostasy because they had converted to

³³⁰ Mokarian, *supra* note 98.

³³¹ *Id.*

³³² *Id.*

³³³ *Id.*

³³⁴ *Id.*

Christianity from Islam. This charge was later dropped in the Revolutionary Court. Nazli Mokarian, however, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment on other charges in the Shiraz criminal court. At that time, she was seven months pregnant and was not able to serve the sentence. So, she left the country to avoid being sent to the prison.³³⁵

7. Confiscation and Conversion of Christian Properties

Shortly after the 1979 revolution, Iranian people faced a new reality, in which not only religious freedom was restricted, but also private ownership was not respected. Many properties belonging to ordinary citizens, including members of religious minorities, were confiscated by the Iranian government. In this section, the religious and legal background of such confiscations will be explained. Subsequently, specific incidents will be discussed to provide additional context on the extent of government policies against the evangelical Christian community.

7.1. Shi'a Clerics' Perspective

According to a number of Shi'a jurists, Christian churches and Jewish synagogues that are in the Islamic lands must be held in high regard, as long as their owners have not vanished and they comply with the *dhimmī* rules.³³⁶ Even if such buildings turned into ruins, their premises and belongings must be kept secure.³³⁷ Another group of Shi'a jurists rule that if no other Christian or Jew lives in an area, or the *dhimmī* treaty no longer is in force, Muslims may convert abandoned churches or synagogues into mosques. They argue that a church or a synagogue was erected and endowed as a place of worship, and therefore must remain the same.³³⁸

In response to an *istiftā*, Ayatollah Mohammad-Reza Golpaygani, a senior Shi'a cleric, provided that if a church became a Muslim property, the new owner must convert the church into a mosque, because any other usage is forbidden.³³⁹ Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Bahjat, a prominent Shi'a jurist, stated that destroying a church or synagogue is not permissible, unless under the same conditions that a mosque needs to be demolished.³⁴⁰

³³⁵ *Id.*

³³⁶ Ali-Akbar Mohammadzadeh, *Aḥkām Fiqhī-Ḥuqūqī Masjid [Jurisprudential and Legal Rules about Mosque]*, 4 DŪ FAṢLNĀMIH 'ILMĪ-EKHTIṢĀSĪ MA'ĀRIF FIQH 'ALAVĪ [MA'ĀRIF FIQH ALAVI BI-QUARTERLY JOURNAL], 35-6 (2017), <http://ensani.ir/file/download/article/1536734231-10128-4-2.pdf> Historically, *dhimmī* is a treaty of protection between the Islamic ruler and conquered *Ahl al-Kitab* [People of the Book], which included Jews, Christians, Sabaeans, and sometimes Zoroastrians and Hindus. Accordingly, adult male *dhimmīs* [non-Muslims] were required to pay tax on their income. They were also subject to restrictions and regulations in dress, occupation, and residence. In return, the Islamic ruler offered them the security of life and property, communal self-government, and freedom of religious practice. See *Dhimmī*, The Oxford Dictionary of Islam (2003), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095715324>

³³⁷ Mohammadzadeh, *supra* note 336.

³³⁸ MOHAMMAD-HASSAN BAQIR NAJAFI, JAVĀHIR AL-KALĀM FĪ SHARḤ SHARĀ'Ī AL-ISLĀM JILD 14 [THE JEWEL OF WORD IN EXPLANATION OF THE CANONS OF ISLAM, VOL. 14], 132, 136-7 (Abbas Quchani & Ali Akhondi ed., Daftar Intishārāt Islāmī Jāmi'ih Mudarīsīn Ḥūzih 'ilmīyih Qom 1397 [2018]) (1850).

³³⁹ SEYED MOHAMMAD-REZA MOUSAVI GOLPAYGANI, MAJMA' AL-MASĀYIL JILD 1 [THE COLLECTION OF SUBJECTS, VOL. 1], 157-8 (2019), (Ali Karimi Jahromi et al.).

³⁴⁰ *Fatāwāy Āyatullāh Bahjat Dar Mūrīd Masājīd [Ayatollah Bahjat's Fatwas about Mosques]*, Tabnak News (Feb. 13, 2019), <https://bit.ly/3imqwly>

Despite such rulings, there have been cases of converting a church to a new use. The Evangelical Church inside the Ekbatan Hospital in Hamedan, which is a nationally registered cultural heritage monument, has been used as a conference hall over the past years.³⁴¹ Similarly, a church located in the city of Haft-Gel, in Khuzestan Province, has been converted into a school.³⁴²

7.2. Government of Confiscation

Ayatollah Khomeini believed that the endowment of a property for the benefit of a church or synagogue is illegitimate and void.³⁴³ Not surprisingly, the Iranian government used his jurisprudential opinion and enacted laws enabling the seizure of properties belonging to religious minorities. Article 45 of the Constitution, which deals with public property, empowered the Iranian government to possess and use “uncultivated or abandoned” land and “property of undetermined ownership” in accordance with the public interest.³⁴⁴ Article 49 of the Constitution also provides the legal path for seizing assets from criminal activities.³⁴⁵ During the 1980s, the Article 49 Courts were established to systematize expropriations. The Article 49 Court is a branch of the Revolutionary Courts in each province and continues to operate today.³⁴⁶

In addition, Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam, also known as EIKO, was established based on an edict signed by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. Accordingly, a new entity was created to manage and sell properties “without owners” and direct much of the proceeds to charity. EIKO has collected a giant portfolio of such real estate by claiming sometimes falsely, that they are abandoned or have been obtained through illegal activities.³⁴⁷

Similarly, the Mostazafan Foundation [*Bunyād Mustāz‘afān*], also known as the Foundation of the Oppressed, was established and granted legal authority to confiscate different types of properties.³⁴⁸ These two organizations are under the direct stewardship of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and only report to him. While Mostazafan Foundation generally acts transparently regarding its practice and listing of confiscated properties, EIKO’s role in confiscations is more

³⁴¹ *Kilīsāy Enjīlī Hamedan; Sālun Ejtimā‘āt Bimāristān Va Yā Mūzih Pizishkī? [Hamedan’s Evangelical Church; A Hospital’s Conference Hall or a Medical Museum?]*, Mohabat News (Mar. 3, 2017), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=16720>

³⁴² *Kilīsā Hāy Masīhīyān Dar Ostān Khuzistan Bi Makhruhīh Tabdīl Shudand [Christians’ Churches in Khuzestan Province Turned into Ruins + Picture]*, Mohabat News (Jul. 4, 2019), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=31710>

³⁴³ *Masa‘il Marbū‘āt Bi Vaqf; Bargirīfīh Āz Tarjumih Tahīr al-Vasīlih Ḥāzrat Emām Khomeini Rahbar Kabīr Enqīlāb Eslāmī [Issues Related to Endowment; Adopted from the Translation of Tahīr al-Vasīlih by Emām Khomeini, the Great Leader of the Revolution]*, issue No. 19, Edārih Kul Mūqūfāt va Mustāghilāt (affiliated with Shah Abdol-Azim Shrine in Shar-e Ray), <https://moghofat.abdulazim.com/fa/node/129> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

³⁴⁴ Qanuni Assasi Jumhuri Islami Iran [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran], art.45.

³⁴⁵ *Id.*, art.49.

³⁴⁶ Qanuni Nahveh Ejray Asl 49 Qanuni Assasi Jumhuri Islami Iran [Law on Enforcing Article 49 of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Constitution], 1363 [1984], art. 3, <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/90948>

³⁴⁷ Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam [*Sitād Ejraīyy Farmāni Ḥāzrat Emām*] is an economic giant that currently holds stakes in nearly every sector of the Iranian industry, including finance, oil, and telecommunications. It is estimated that EIKO’s holdings of real estate, corporate stakes, and other assets total about \$95 billion. See Steve Stecklow et al., *Assets of the Ayatollah: The Economic Empire Behind Iran’s Supreme Leader*, Reuters (Nov. 11, 2013), <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part1>

³⁴⁸ JEFF D. COLGAN, *PETRO-AGGRESSION WHEN OIL CAUSES WAR* 169 (2013).

hidden. In 2000, a judiciary bylaw granted the exclusive authority over property taken in the name of Supreme Leader to EIKO.³⁴⁹

7.3. Cases of Confiscation and Conversion

Within a year after the 1979 revolution, the Episcopal Church's properties, including two big hospitals in Shiraz and Isfahan, the Christoffel and Nour Ayin institutes for the blind in Isfahan, and the bishop's house, were confiscated by the new government.³⁵⁰ The IRGC took over the Mursalin Hospital in Shiraz and changed the hospital's name to Muslimin Hospital.³⁵¹ Bishop Dehqani-Tafti filed a complaint against the confiscation, but it went nowhere.³⁵²

In 1980, the Isfahan Revolutionary Prosecutor's Office announced that the Christian Hospital in Isfahan is a spy station for the West, and "out of respect for Christian brothers" its name was changed to 'īsa ibn Maryam [Jesus son of Mary].³⁵³ By the order of Fathullah Omid Najafabadi, the Shari'a ruler of Isfahan at the time, the hospital was confiscated for the benefit of the Mostazafan Foundation.³⁵⁴ In his ruling, he stated that the hospital was "built using the money belonging to the oppressed Muslim people to be used for the benefit of the imperialists" and "to poison people with their propaganda."³⁵⁵

³⁴⁹ Steve Stecklow et al., *supra* note 347.

³⁵⁰ Other properties of the Episcopal Church that were confiscated included two outpatient clinics in Isfahan and Yazd, a training farm for the blind in Isfahan's suburb, and schools and dormitories for boys and girls. See SPELLMAN, *supra* note 57 at 164. See also *Mājarāyī Sāzmān Nābīnāyān Christoffel Ki Muṣādīrih Shud [The Story of Christoffel Institute for the Blind that was Confiscated]*, Tabnak News (Sept. 19, 2020), available at <https://bit.ly/3bYPPbH> (discussing the seizure of the properties endowed for the blind).

³⁵¹ Mohammad-Hossein Azizi et al., *In Commemoration of Haj Mohammad Nemazee (1895 – 1972): The Founder of Nemazee Hospital in Shiraz*, 12 ARCHIVES OF IRANIAN MEDICINE (2009) 322-3, <http://www.ams.ac.ir/AIM/09123/0021.pdf> The IRGC Navy currently manages and operate this hospital. See *Bimāristāni Muslimin Shiraz; Bimāristāni Sipāh [Shiraz's Muslimin Hospital; IRGC Hospital]*, IraninForm.com, <https://iraninform.com/%D8%A8%D8%A7%DB%8C%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C/12630> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

³⁵² *Sukūt Nahād Hāy Āmnīyātī Va Qazāiyy Dar Murid Tirūr Va Haḡf Rahbarān Kilīsāiyy Dar Iran [The Silence of Security and Judicial Officials Regarding the Assassination and Elimination of Church Leaders in Iran]*, Mohabat News (Oct. 3, 2017), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=21271>

³⁵³ *Manzil Muṣādīrihiyy Osqf Dehqani Dar Isfahān Bi "azakhānih" Tabdīl Shud [The Confiscated House of Bishop Dehqani in Isfahan Became a "Mourning House"]*, Mohabat News (Sept. 20, 2020), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=41197>

³⁵⁴ HASAN DEHQANI-TAFTI, *YEK CHAH O DO CHESHMEH (ONE WELL WITH TWO SOURCES): FROM TAFT TO WINCHESTER 1999*. Several years later, the confiscation order of the Christian Hospital, which was issued by Fathullah Omid Najafabadi, declared void, and the hospital's title was given to the Isfahan University of Medical Science. See REZA MOKHTARI & MORTEZA MIRDAR, *DARD U DARD; MEMOIRS OF SEYED REZA MIR MOHAMMAD SADEGHI 2011*. See also Ehsan Mehrabi, *Mutahamān Va Muṭali'ān Yik Tirūr [Defendants and Informants of an Assassination]*, Zeitoons (Feb. 19, 2018), available at <https://www.zeitoons.com/45592> (discussing the execution of Omid Najafabadi during the power struggle between revolutionary groups during the 1980s).

³⁵⁵ Anglican Ink, *supra* note 72. The Isfahan Christian Hospital was built by the Church Missionary Society in 1904 and was endowed to the Episcopal Church in Isfahan. See *Bimāristāni 'īsa ibn Maryam [Jesus Son of Virgin Mary Hospital]*, Gashtool.com, <https://gashtool.com/place/16037> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).



The Christian Hospital was confiscated and renamed in 1979 in Isfahan.

Similarly, the Christoffel and Nour Ayin institutes, which were both endowed for the benefit of the blind, were confiscated. Currently, they are semi-active or being used for other causes.³⁵⁶ The bishop's house in Isfahan, which was the seat of the Anglican Church in Iran, was confiscated by the order of the Revolutionary Court in November 1979. Until recently, the house was left unused. In 2020, the Mostazafan Foundation restored the bishop's house.³⁵⁷ In July 2021, the head of the Mostazafan Foundation declared that the bishop's house will become a museum.³⁵⁸

More recently, in 2015, the Tehran Revolutionary Court ruled that Sharon Garden, a church retreat center belonging to the Assembly of God denomination in Karaj, must be confiscated for the benefit of EIKO.³⁵⁹ According to the court's ruling, the Iranian Assembly of God denomination is "one of the branches of the American Philadelphia Church, which is funded by the United States and the CIA spy agency to infiltrate the countries of the Islamic world, especially Iran, and to engage people in evangelical activities."³⁶⁰ The confiscation ruling is based on articles 10 and 11 of the Amendment to the Regulation of Handling Cases Subject to Article 49 of the Constitution. Accordingly, "the property of persons who have left the country and their relationship with militant groups (*baghi* groups, Zionists, CIA spies, and the like) are proven, is no longer protected and can be confiscated by a court order."³⁶¹

In 2019, the Assyrian Evangelical Church in Tabriz, which is a nationally registered cultural heritage monument, was raided by MOI agents and a group from the EIKO. They removed the cross from the top of the church tower, changed the church's locks, and asked the church's

³⁵⁶ Tabnak News, *supra* note 350.

³⁵⁷ Anglican Ink, *supra* note 72.

³⁵⁸ 'imārat "Dāyirih Osqufi" Dar Isfahān Mūzih Mīshavad [The Bishop's House in Isfahan Will Become a Museum], ISNA (Jul. 12, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3l6Bej3>

³⁵⁹ Eqdām "Sitād Ejrāiyy Farmān Imam" Barāy Muṣādirih Bāgh Shārūn, Muti'aliq Bi Shūrāy Kilīsā Hāay Jamā'at Rabbānī [The Action of "Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam" to Confiscate the Sharon Garden, Belonging to the Council of the Jamā'at Rabbānī Church], Mellion Iran (Apr. 6, 2018), <https://mellion.org/iran/160819>

³⁶⁰ Article 18, *supra* note 108.

³⁶¹ Eslahiyeh Ayin Nameh Nahveh Residegi Bi Parvandih Hay Mužu' Asl 49 Qanuni Asasi [Amendment of the Bylaw of Handling Cases Subject to Article 49 of the Constitution], Tehran 1380 [2001], art. 11, <https://www.solh.ir/regulation/7/1910>

attendant to leave the premises. They also stated that Assyrians no longer can hold any religious ceremonies there.³⁶² After a while, a senior legal adviser to the president questioned the legality of the church's closure.³⁶³ The Assyrians' representative to the Parliament, however, denied that any confiscation has ever happened.³⁶⁴ Several state news outlets also repeated the same narrative.³⁶⁵

The Revolutionary Court had ordered the confiscation of this church for the benefit of EIKO in 2011, but church members were allowed to have services until 2019.³⁶⁶ According to Mansour Borji, the Advocacy Director of Article 18, in some cases of confiscation, the Iranian government has allowed the church members to look after the listed church building and have occasional prayers under the strict control of the authorities.³⁶⁷



The Assyrian Evangelical Church in Tabriz. Its cross was removed in 2019.

8. Elimination of Christians' Presence

³⁶² *Kilīsāy Enjīlī Āshūrīān Tabriz Ta 'īl Shud [The Assyrians' Evangelical Church in Tabriz Was Shut Down]*, FCNN.com (May 24, 2019), <https://fcnn.com/?p=7710>

³⁶³ *Ta 'īlī Va Bi Pāyīn Kishīdan Šalīb Kilīsāy Enjīlī Āshūrī Tabriz Mughāyīr Bā Ošūl Qānūn Āsāsī Āst [Closing and Lowering the Cross of the Assyrian Evangelical Church in Tabriz is against the Principles of the Constitution]*, Dolat.ir (June 16, 2019), <http://dolat.ir/detail/323531>

³⁶⁴ *Yonathan Betkolia Dar Bayānīyihy Maṭraḥ Kard: Pāsukh Bi Shāyi 'āt Pirāmūn 'adam Tavajuh Bi Kilīsāhā Dar Iran + Tašāvīr Kilīsā Hāy Marīmat Shudīh [Yonathan Betkolia said in a Statement: Response to the Rumors about the Lack of Attention to Churches in Iran + Pictures of the Restored Churches]*, ICNA (Jul. 21, 2019), <https://bit.ly/3oIbW9Y>

³⁶⁵ *Jaryān Pulump Kilīsāy Enjīlī Āshūrī Tabriz Chīst? [What Is the Story of Closing the Evangelical Assyrian Church in Tabriz?]*, YJC News Agency (Jul. 16, 2019), <https://bit.ly/3qe1kzN>

³⁶⁶ FCNN.com, *supra* note 362.

³⁶⁷ *Iran Ministry of Intelligence and EIKO Closes Assyrian Presbyterian Church*, Article 18 (June 18, 2019), <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/case-studies/4623/> Article 18 is a non-profit organization based in London that advocates for and promotes religious freedom in Iran. See *Who We Are*, Article 18, <https://articleeighteen.com/aboutus/> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

Since its early days, the Islamic Republic has tried to diminish Christians' presence in the country and limit it to small groups of ethnic Christians. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance does not allow Armenian and Assyrian churches to renovate their buildings and transfer the ownership of their properties freely.³⁶⁸ They also have not been allowed to construct any new church buildings.³⁶⁹ In addition, some of their properties have been left abandoned due to the significant drop in the number of ethnic Christians living in Iran after the 1979 revolution.³⁷⁰

The Iranian government often cannot legally repurpose closed churches because many of them are nationally registered cultural heritage monuments. According to Mansour Borji, churches usually remain unused, often neglected, until they turn into ruins and then are demolished by the authorities.³⁷¹ An abandoned Assyrian Catholic church in the city of Andimeshk, in Khuzestan Province, was leveled in 2006.³⁷² Two years later, the bell tower of the historical Armenian Church in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province was destroyed, and its symbolic cross and valuable items were taken away. This church, which is a well-known nationally registered cultural heritage monument, later has been used as *hosseinieh* and a library.³⁷³

St. Andrew's Church in Kerman was bulldozed in 2011.³⁷⁴ This church was associated with the Episcopal Church and had already been shut down in 1992.³⁷⁵ Some reports indicate that St. Andrew's Church, which was a nationally registered cultural heritage monument, had been confiscated and used for residential and commercial purposes for years.³⁷⁶

³⁶⁸ Center for Human Rights in Iran, *supra* note 238 at 19.

³⁶⁹ The construction of St. Gregor Losavritch's Church in Tehran had started before the 1979 revolution but completed in 1983. See *Kilisāy Gregor Rūshangar Moqadas (Gregor Losavritch) Tehran [The Church of St. Gregor the Illuminator (Gregor Losavritch) Tehran]*, Armenian Diocese of Tehran (Aug. 9, 2018), <http://www.tehranprelacy.com/farsi/tehran-churches-fa/1924-2018080907>

³⁷⁰ *Nuṭq "Bit Kilā" Darbārih Vaz'īyat Masīhīyān Iran; Jafāgarān Pardih Āz Jafāy Khūd Bardāshtand [Speech of "Betkolia" about the Situation of Christians in Iran; Persecutors Unveiled Their Persecution]*, Mohabat News (Jan. 23, 2019), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=29551>

³⁷¹ *Iranian Church Closed, Cross Torn Down*, World Watch Monitor (May 24, 2019), <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/iranian-church-closed-cross-torn-down/>

³⁷² Mohabat News, *supra* note 342.

³⁷³ *Kilisāy Ārāmanih Ma'mūrih Borujen [Armenian Ma'mūrih Church in Borujen]*, SeeIran.com, <https://rb.gy/tvs7hd> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

³⁷⁴ *Kilisāiy Qadīmī Dar Kerman Takhrīb Shud [An Old Church in Kerman Was Demolished]*, BBC Persian (Aug. 17, 2011), https://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/2011/08/110817_141_pics_church_kerman_runover See also *Kilisāy Kerman [Kerman's Church]*, Alaedin.travel, available at <https://bit.ly/2Xzvotr> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021) (discussing the name and history of St. Andrew's Church in Kerman).

³⁷⁵ Ikelisa.com, *supra* note 86.

³⁷⁶ FCNN.com, *supra* note 177.



St. Andrew's Church in Kerman was bulldozed in 2011.

In the most recent incident, the 70-year-old Adventist Church was demolished by the order of the Municipality of Tehran on November 3, 2020. The building had a private owner and had been abandoned in recent years.³⁷⁷ Although the church was not a nationally registered cultural heritage site, it had a symbolic cross, and the Iranian National Heritage Organization had stopped its demolition before.³⁷⁸

In addition to the churches that have been destroyed, Christian cemeteries have also been vandalized and destroyed over the past years.³⁷⁹ In 2010, the municipality of Mashhad destroyed some parts of the Armenian Cemetery in spite of its historical value in order to occupy its land.³⁸⁰ In 2012, a historic Christian cemetery in Kerman, which was a nationally registered cultural heritage monument, was demolished overnight by local authorities.³⁸¹ In 2013, the municipality of Qazvin bulldozed the historic Armenian cemetery and converted it to a public

³⁷⁷ *Tehran Church with Giant Cross Demolished*, Article 18 (Nov. 3, 2020), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/7152/>

³⁷⁸ *Masjed-Jamei: Shahr-dārī Tehran Dar Takhrīb Kilīsāy Ādvintīsthā Naqsh Dārad [Masjed-Jamei: Tehran Municipality Is Involved in the Destruction of the Adventist Church]*, Radio Farda (Nov. 9, 2020), <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/adventist-church-riun-tehran/30938112.html> One report indicates that Ayatollah Khomeini believed the Adventist denomination was unable to evangelize Muslims and therefore its activities were harmless. See *Mājarāyī Kilīsāy “Adventist”/ Emām Khomeini: Inhā Lāubālī Kardihand Valī Bīdīn Nakardihand [The Story of “the Adventist” Church/Imam Khomeini: They Have Committed Immorality, But They Have Not Been Irreligious]*, Mashregh News Agency (Feb. 12, 2013), <https://bit.ly/3iz4QSI>

³⁷⁹ Reza Najafi, *Zindigān ‘alayih Murdigān; Hāshiyehiy Bar Padīdih Takhrīb Qubūr Dar Iran [Alive People against the Dead; A Commentary about the Phenomenon of Gravestones’ Destruction in Iran]*, Mellion Iran (May 29, 2018), <https://mellion.org/iran/168637>

³⁸⁰ *Tašvīrī: Gūristān Tarīkhī Ārāmanih Mashhad [Photo Report: Historical Armenian Cemetery in Mashhad]*, AsrIran.com (May 20, 2010), <https://bit.ly/3ouq7z0> In 2016, this cemetery was registered as a cultural heritage monument. See *Ṣabt Kilīsā Va Qabristān Ārāmanih Mashhad Dar Fihrist Āṣār Milī [Registration of the Armenian Church and Cemetery in Mashhad in the List of National Monuments]*, Mohabat News (Apr. 18, 2016), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=8077>

³⁸¹ *Qabristān Tarīkhī Masīhīyān Dar Kerman Zīru Rū Shud [The Historic Christians Cemetery in Kerman Was Turned Upside Down]*, HRANA (Apr. 4, 2012), <https://www.hra-news.org/2012/hranews/1-10565/> See also Fatemeh Ali-Asghar, *Chirā Bi Murdigān Rahm NimīKunim [Why Do We Not Have Mercy on the Dead?]*, HamshahriOnline.ir (Feb. 28, 2018), available at <https://bit.ly/3s4gcT8> (discussing that the cemetery in the premise of the *Qal’eh Dokhtar* ancient site was a nationally registered cultural heritage monument).

park.³⁸² In 2014, the Christians' cemetery in Ahvaz was vandalized.³⁸³ Over the years, the municipality of Ahvaz has dumped a huge amount of trash in the premises of this cemetery.³⁸⁴

In 2017, Kermanshah's Municipality started to destroy the historic Christian cemetery, which already was significantly destroyed under the pretext of irrigating the cemetery grounds.³⁸⁵ Similarly, the municipality of Bushehr has occupied some parts of the Christians' cemetery and sold the land for residential purposes.³⁸⁶ In 2019, a part of the historic Christian cemetery in Hamedan was turned into a parking lot.³⁸⁷ In the same year, the historical Armenian cemeteries in Kerman and Isfahan were vandalized.³⁸⁸ In 2020, the Tehran Municipality started a project to restore the historic Christian cemetery in the Tehran neighborhood of Doulab.³⁸⁹ The project has created serious concerns about the preservation of the cemetery, part of which is a nationally registered cultural heritage monument.³⁹⁰

9. Violations of Iranian Law

Article 13 of the Islamic Republic's Constitution declares Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians as recognized religious minorities, who can freely perform their religion and act in accordance with

³⁸² *Gūristān Ārāmanih Qazvin Va Takhrīb Aṣar Tarīkhī [Qazvin's Armenian Cemetery and Destruction of a Historical Monument]*, ISNA News Agency (Nov. 1, 2020), <https://bit.ly/39g41dv>

³⁸³ *Takhrīb Ārāmīstān Tarīkhī Lahistānīhā Dar Ahvaz; "Dari" Gūristān Va Ṣalībhā Rā Burdand [Destruction of the Historical Polish Cemetery in Ahvaz; the Cemetery's "Door" and the Crosses Were Taken Away]*, IranWire (Aug. 21, 2014), <https://iranwire.com/fa/news/khuzestan/12119> The cemetery's board of trustees later could restore and repairs some parts of the cemetery. See *Marimat Qabristān "Masīhīyān Ahvaz" Tavasūṭ Mutivalīyānash Āghāz Shud [Restoration of the "Ahvaz Christians'" Cemetery Was Started by Its Trustees]*, Mohabat News (Jul. 18, 2016), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=10605>

³⁸⁴ *Ostāndār Khuzestan: Qabristān Ārāmanih Va Lahistānīhā Tā Pāyān Emsāl Āmādih Bāzdīd Gardishgarān Mīshavad [Governor of Khuzestan: The Armenian and the Poles' Cemeteries Will Be Ready for Tourists' Visit by the End of This Year]*, IRNA News Agency (Jan. 19, 2017), <https://bit.ly/3omPgyD>

³⁸⁵ *Takhrīb 'amdī Qabristān Masīhīyān Kermanshah/Video [Deliberate Destruction of the Christians' Cemetery in Kermanshah/Video]*, HRANA (June 11, 2017), <https://www.hra-news.org/2017/hranews/a-11002/>

³⁸⁶ *Takhrīb Gūristān Tarīkhī Masīhīyān Dar Isfahan [Destruction of the Historic Christians Cemetery in Isfahan]*, Ettelaat.net (Dec. 28, 2019), <https://bit.ly/3uwk2p8>

³⁸⁷ *Kilīsāy Enjīlī Hamedan, Anbār Va Sang Qabr Hāyash Pārking Māshīnā Shud! [Hamedan Evangelical Church Became a Warehouse and Its Gravestones Became Parking Lot!]*, Mohabat News (Nov. 18, 2019), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=36069>

³⁸⁸ *Takhrīb Gustardih Qabristān Masīhīyān Dar Kerman [Extensive Destruction of the Christian Cemetery in Kerman]*, Mohabat News (Feb. 27, 2019), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=30067> See also *Takhrīb Gūristān Tarīkhī Masīhīyān Dar Isfahan [Destruction of the Historic Christians Cemetery in Isfahan]*, HRANA (Dec. 26, 2019), available at <https://www.hra-news.org/2019/hranews/a-23166/> (discussing the destruction of some gravestones and crosses in the Isfahan cemetery).

³⁸⁹ *Ārāmīstān Ārāmanih Dūlāb Rā Daryābīm [Take Care of the Armenian Cemetery in Dolab]*, EtemadOnline.com (Dec. 31, 2020), <https://bit.ly/2Xks2dH> Currently, the Dolab Cemetery is not open for public visit. See *Qabristānī Shābih Mūzih Dar Darvāzih Dūlāb Tehran [A Cemetery Like Museum in the Tehran's Neighborhood of Dolab]*, IranWire (Jul. 29, 2020), <https://iranwire.com/fa/features/39860>

³⁹⁰ *Takhrīb Qabristān Ārāmanih Dolab Tehran Tavasūṭ Shardārī Bi Esmi Marimat [Destroying the Armenian Cemetery in Tehran's neighborhood of Dolab by the Municipality in the Name of Restoration]*, Mohabat News (Jan. 2, 2021), <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=43060> See also *Takhrīb Gūristān Ārāmanih Dolab Zīr Sāyih Bīmas'ūlīatī Khalīfih Garī/Dandān Tīz Shāhrdārī Tehran [Destruction of the Armenian Cemetery in Dolab Because of the Caliphate's Lack of Responsibility/The Sharp Tooth of Tehran's Municipality]*, Mohabat News (June 20, 2017), available at <https://mohabatnews.com/?p=19132> (discussing that the Armenian section of the Dolab Cemetery is a nationally registered cultural heritage monument).

their own canon in matters of personal life.³⁹¹ This article makes no reference to the denomination, language, or ethnicity of Christians as members of a recognized religious minority. Despite this, only those ethnic Christians who do not proselytize among Muslims have, to some extent, enjoyed the rights guaranteed by the Constitution under the Islamic Republic. Christian converts have been treated not as a religious minority, but as members of a dangerous sect.

The Iranian Constitution does not explicitly prohibit discrimination based on religion (art.19), but it declares that “no one may be molested or prosecuted for merely holding a belief” (art. 23).³⁹² The arrest and imprisonment of Christian converts, merely because of following the religion of their choice, violate the constitutional guarantee against inquisition into people's beliefs.

Under Article 14 of the Constitution, all Muslims are duty-bound to treat “non-Muslims” in conformity with the principles of Islamic justice and to respect their human rights.³⁹³ In addition, several constitutional provisions provide due process rights to all people, regardless of their religion, such as protection against unreasonable searches and seizures, speedy trial, assistance of counsel, and prohibition of torture.³⁹⁴ Moreover, Article 26 of the Constitution provides the freedom of association for religious societies, which logically includes the evangelical Christian community as well.³⁹⁵ Article 64 also guarantees the right of religious minorities to elect their own representatives in the Iranian parliament.³⁹⁶

The Iranian government systematically violates Christian converts’ freedom of religion. The Islamic Republic has not granted any licenses to new church organizations and for building new churches, prohibited services in Persian, and excluded Christian converts from state-recognized churches.³⁹⁷ Christian converts’ due process rights are also being systematically violated by the Iranian government as well.

At least three witnesses reported that their homes were searched without a warrant and their belongings were confiscated and never returned. In addition, in the cases involving Christian converts, the prisoners often have either no access or very limited access to an attorney before their trials. The appointed attorneys often are not informed about the court proceedings and the judge does not allow them to defend their clients. At least one of the witnesses interviewed by IHRDC stated that his attorney was threatened by security forces so that he would drop his case.

10. Violations of International Law

The Islamic Republic has distinguished between ethnic Christians who do not proselytize and Christian converts, and systematically violated the latter’s human rights. This section examines

³⁹¹ Qanuni Assasi Jumhuri Islami Iran [Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran], art.13.

³⁹² *Id.*, art. 19, 23.

³⁹³ *Id.*, art.14.

³⁹⁴ *Id.*, art. 22, 26, 27, 32, 35, 38.

³⁹⁵ *Id.*, art. 26.

³⁹⁶ *Id.*, art. 64.

³⁹⁷ Center for Human Rights in Iran, *supra* note 238 at 18-19.

the myriad ways in which the Iranian government violates its international human rights obligations with respect to Christian converts residing in Iran.

10.1. Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides, “[E]veryone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.”³⁹⁸ Article 18.1 of the ICCPR guarantees people’s right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion by an almost identical language.³⁹⁹ This right inherently includes the right to change and manifest one’s religion.⁴⁰⁰

Article 18.2 of the ICCPR bars coercion that would impair the right to have or adopt a religion or belief, including the use of threat of physical force or penal sanctions to compel believers or non-believers to adhere to religious beliefs and congregations, to recant their religion or belief or to convert.⁴⁰¹ Similarly, Article 27 of the ICCPR declares that members of religious minorities “shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group [. . .] to profess and practice their own religion.”⁴⁰² Moreover, Article 19 (2) of the ICCPR guarantees that everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression, which includes religious discourse.⁴⁰³

Iran has ratified the ICCPR with no reservations. Despite this, the Islamic Republic does not uphold its obligations with regard to the Christian convert community. Criminalizing conversion to other faiths is in clear violation of Article 18 as it effectively coerces citizens to refrain from adopting or manifesting religious beliefs. In addition, Christian converts are not allowed to congregate in officially registered churches or house churches openly, freely, and without fear of persecution. The suppressive policies against house churches are against the Islamic Republic’s commitment under Articles 21 and 22 of ICCPR that provides for the right of peaceful assembly and freedom of association.⁴⁰⁴ Moreover, when the government restricts the access to the Bible and other religious literature in Persian, it effectively intervenes with Christian converts’ right, provided by Article 19 of the ICCPR, to seek and receive the ideas and information of their choice.⁴⁰⁵

10.2. Right to Life

³⁹⁸ G.A. Res. 217A (III), U.N. Doc. A/810 at 71 (1948) [hereinafter General Assembly resolution].

³⁹⁹ ICCPR, art. 18.1.

⁴⁰⁰ UN Human Rts. Comm., Gen. Comment. No. 22, art. 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion), (Jul. 30, 1993), CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fb22.html>

⁴⁰¹ ICCPR, art. 18.2.

⁴⁰² *Id.* art.27.

⁴⁰³ *Id.* art. 19(2).

⁴⁰⁴ *Id.* art. 21, 22.

⁴⁰⁵ *Id.* art. 19.

No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of the inherent right to life. Article 3 of the UDHR provides that everyone has “the right to life, liberty, and security of person.”⁴⁰⁶ Article 11 (2) of the UDHR also states, “[N]o one shall be held guilty of any penal offense on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offense, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed.”⁴⁰⁷ In addition, crimes and punishments must be defined clearly.⁴⁰⁸ Article 15 of the ICCPR limits criminal liability and punishment to clear and precise provisions in the law that were in place and applicable at the time the act or omission took place.⁴⁰⁹

Article 6(2) of the ICCPR declares that in countries that have not abolished the death penalty, “a sentence of death may be imposed only for the most serious crimes in accordance with the law,” and must be carried out pursuant to a “final judgment rendered by a competent court.”⁴¹⁰ Although the ICCPR does not define the most serious crimes, its commentary says it must be read restrictively to mean that the death penalty should be a quite exceptional measure.⁴¹¹

First, the act of apostasy, which has been defined as “refusing to continue to follow [...] a religious faith,” does not fall within the category of the most serious crime punishable by death.⁴¹² It is to be noted that the influence of intelligence forces in the judiciary has undermined the Iranian courts’ competency to the extent that they issue the death penalty, not as a quite exceptional measure, but quite frequently.

Second, the Iranian government has a pattern of arbitrarily charging Christian converts with apostasy. The IPC neither criminalizes changing one’s religion nor defines what can constitute apostasy. According to Article 167 of the Constitution, the judge should deliver his judgment on the basis of authoritative Islamic sources if he cannot find any codified law in force. There is no uniformity in rulings of apostasy under the Shi’a jurisprudence. While the majority of Shi’a jurists rule that conversion to a religion other than Islam could constitute apostasy, some of them reject capital punishment for converting. The Iranian government’s practices violate the right to life and the requirement for legal certainty under international human rights law.

10.3. Arbitrary Arrest and Detention

As a party to the ICCPR, Iran is required to implement Article 9, which bans arbitrary arrest or detention. “Anyone who is arrested shall be informed, at the time of arrest, of the reasons for his arrest and shall be promptly informed of any charges against him.”⁴¹³ Depriving a person of his or her liberty because of exercising the rights or freedoms guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the ICCPR, such as freedom of religion, thought, and

⁴⁰⁶ General Assembly resolution, *supra* note 398.

⁴⁰⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁰⁸ FABIÁN O. RAIMONDO, GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF LAW IN THE DECISIONS OF INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURTS AND TRIBUNALS 2 (2008).

⁴⁰⁹ ICCPR, art. 15.

⁴¹⁰ *Id.* art. 6(2).

⁴¹¹ UN Human Rts. Comm., Gen. Comment. No. 5, art. 6 (Right to Life), (Sept. 3, 2019), CCPR/C/GC/35, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5e5e75e04.html>

⁴¹² *Apostasy*, Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apostasy> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

⁴¹³ ICCPR, art. 9.

expression, is considered arbitrary detention. Moreover, a violation of the international norms relating to the right to a fair trial is of such gravity as to give the deprivation of liberty an arbitrary character.⁴¹⁴

The Iranian government has arrested and prosecuted many Christian converts because of their religious beliefs, and it has falsely charged them with serious offenses such as acting against national security. The security forces usually raid house churches without showing any search or arrest warrant. Christian converts have not been indicted within a reasonable time, often have no access to an attorney during detention, and their appointed attorneys are not given access to their cases before the trial. These incidents constitute a prolonged pattern of violations of Article 9 of the ICCPR.

10.4. Torture, Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Article 7 of the ICCPR provides, “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”⁴¹⁵ The witnesses interviewed by IHRDC and also numerous accounts discussed in this report indicate that Christian convert prisoners have been subjected to mistreatment, ranging from psychological torture to physical abuse. They reported being insulted and interrogated for long hours, detained in unsanitary conditions in crowded prison wards, and deprived of access to proper medical care and other necessities, such as food and clothing.

According to the commentary of Article 7, state actions that endanger the dignity of the detained individual and cause physical pain and mental suffering are prohibited.⁴¹⁶ Being detained in unsanitary custodial conditions and denial of medical care are clear examples of violations of Article 7. It is to be noted that some Christian converts reported that the harassment by government’s officials has continued after they were released from prison.

10.5. Right to Education and Work

Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (“ICESCR”) recognizes the right of everyone to education.⁴¹⁷ Despite the Iranian government’s commitment to upholding this right, Christian converts are subjected to discrimination in education. Mary (Fatemeh) Mohammadi converted to Christianity when she was a teenager. In 2019, she was admitted into the Islamic Azad University, Tehran Branch. According to Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), Mohammadi had problems obtaining a student card since early days of the academic semester, which made her “virtually ineligible” to sit in classes. On the eve of final exams, university officials informed her that she was expelled. They provided her neither an

⁴¹⁴ *Individual Complaints and Urgent Appeals, Deliberations*, Arbitrary Detention WG., <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Detention/Pages/Complaints.aspx> (Last visited Jul. 18, 2021).

⁴¹⁵ ICCPR, art. 7.

⁴¹⁶ UN Human Rts. Comm., Gen. Comment. No 20, art. 7 (Prohibition of Torture, or Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment), (1994), HRI/GEN/1/Rev.1 at 30 (1994), <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/gencomm/hrcom20.htm>

⁴¹⁷ 993 U.N.T.S. 3; S. Exec. Doc. D, 95-2 (1978); S. Treaty Doc. No. 95-19; 6 I.L.M. 360 (1967) [hereinafter ICESCR].

explanation nor a written document. She later tweeted that her dismissal from the university was because of her Christian faith and human rights activism.⁴¹⁸

Article 6 of the ICESCR protects the right to work.⁴¹⁹ Accordingly, member states must prevent discrimination in the workplace and in the hiring and firing process. Christian converts, however, have been subjected to systematic employment discrimination in the public and private sectors. Iranian citizens are usually required to declare their religion in employment documents and to attend congregational prayers. A number of Christian converts have lost their jobs or could not be employed due to these conditions. In many government jobs, including in the armed forces, having belief in Islam and practical commitment to *Velayat-e Faqih* are essential requirements for employment.⁴²⁰ As the result, religious minorities, such as Christian converts, cannot be recruited by the armed forces. Male members of religious minorities, however, shall fulfill two years of conscription, unless they become exempted from military service because of medical conditions.⁴²¹

After his release from prison, Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi, a Christian convert, found out that his handicraft license had been revoked. Without such a license from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism, he could not continue his profession as a handicraft artist. MOI agents warned him that any attempt to do his artistic job would cause him serious consequences. “I said, ‘So what should I do?’ [They] responded ‘At most, you could buy a taxi cab and work as a taxi driver!’”⁴²² According to Farokhpour’s wife, MOI agents had accused him of financially supporting the church, and for this reason, they revoked his license.⁴²³

Nazli Mokarian, another Christian convert, also faced discrimination in employment. “Several times, I applied to work in different hospitals where my mother worked, but they were all rejected. Because in the application form you should declare your religion. Or you should attend congregation prayers.”⁴²⁴ Similarly, Mary Mohammadi could not return to her former job since her release from prison. Security forces threatened her employer that hiring Mohammadi would have consequences for her business.⁴²⁵ In 2020, the Revolutionary Court in Busher sentenced Maryam Fallahi, a Christian convert, to permanent dismissal from government jobs and fines because of her Christian activities. After that, she was fired from her job as a nurse in a hospital

⁴¹⁸ *Iranian Christian Activist Kicked Out of University*, Article 18 (Dec. 23, 2019), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/5254/>

⁴¹⁹ ICESCR, art. 6.

⁴²⁰ *Sharāyih Estikhdām Ārtish 1400 [Employment Requirements in Army 2021]*, iranmoshavere.com, <https://bit.ly/2WJq4q6> (Last visited Jul. 30, 2021).

⁴²¹ *Farmāndih Pāygāh Chihārum Havānīrūz Ārtish: Kārkunān Vazīfih Āqaliyat Hāay Mazhabī Barāy ‘izat Kishvar Khidmat Mīkunand [Commander of the 4th Air Force Base of the Army: The Conscripts Belonging Religious Minorities serve the Honor of the Country]*, IRNA (Dec. 29, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3xn7GQs>

⁴²² Farokhpour Haghighi, *supra* note 305.

⁴²³ Rahemi, *supra* note 307.

⁴²⁴ Mokarian, *supra* note 98.

⁴²⁵ *Mary Mohammadi Told She Can’t Have Old Job Back, Arrested Again*, Article 18 (Jan. 21, 2021), <https://articleeighteen.com/news/7699/>

where she worked for 20 years. Sam Khosravi, Fallahi's husband, was also forbidden from working in his job for two years.⁴²⁶

10.6. Right to Equal Protection of the Law and Access to Justice

Article 26 of the ICCPR guarantees equal treatment and protection before the law without any discrimination.⁴²⁷ The Islamic Republic, however, has deprived Christian converts of this right. It does not recognize Christian converts as a religious minority and deprives them of the constitutional rights given to other religious groups. While members of a state-recognized religious minority could convert to another state-recognized religion without facing any consequences, Muslim-born citizens will be prosecuted and punished if they embrace another religion. Christian converts are subjected to systematic legal discrimination.

A number of articles of the IPC are directly discriminatory in their treatment of all non-Muslims, including Christian converts. According to Article 310 of the IPC, if a non-Muslim kills a Muslim, the killer is liable to legal retribution (*qiṣaṣ*), which is the death penalty. On the other hand, however, if a Muslim kills a non-Muslim, the death penalty will be replaced by the payment of blood money (*diyya*) to the family of victim.⁴²⁸

Consuming alcoholic beverages (*Shurb al-khamr*) is a punishable act in the form of 80 lashes under Islamic law.⁴²⁹ The Eucharist is a Christian rite that is considered a sacrament in most churches. Nevertheless, and in violation of Article 13 of the Islamic Republic's Constitution that provides freedom to perform religious rites and ceremonies, at least three Christian converts have been punished for performing the Eucharist. There is no report indicating that ethnic Christians have been punished for performing Eucharist.

Moreover, according to Article 881(bis) of the Iranian Civil Code, a non-Muslim does not inherit from a Muslim, and if there are both Muslims and non-Muslims among the heirs of a deceased person, non-Muslims do not take inheritance even if they have priority to the Muslim heirs.⁴³⁰ Furthermore, Article 1059 of the Iranian Civil Code and Article 22 of the Regulations on the Personal Affairs of Protestant Christians in Iran prohibit marriage between Christians and Muslims.⁴³¹ The latter law provides that a Christian marriage must be conducted in accordance with Christian rites and should be recorded in the special office of the church and the official registry of the church.⁴³² Christian converts cannot marry in stated-recognized churches. The house churches also do not have an official status to register marriage in accordance with the

⁴²⁶ *Tā'yīd Ḥukm Zindān Va Tab'īd Va Maḥrūmīyat Āz Kār Barāy Sih Nūkīsh Masīḥī Dar Būshīhr* [Upholding the Sentences of Imprisonment, Internal Exile, and Deprivation of Work for Three Christian Converts in Bushehr], Radio Farda (Feb. 7, 2021), <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/31081759.html>

⁴²⁷ ICCPR, art. 26.

⁴²⁸ Qanuni Mojazat Islami [Islamic Penal Code], art.310.

⁴²⁹ *Id.*, art.264, 265.

⁴³⁰ Qanuni Manadi [Civil Code], Tehran 1314 [1935], art. 881 (bis), <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/97937>

⁴³¹ *Id.* art. 1059. *See also* Muqararat Ahval Shakhsīyeh Masīhiyan Prutestan Dar Iran [Regulations on the Personal Affairs of Protestant Christians in Iran], Tehran 1378 [1999], art. 22, https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/print_version/135327

⁴³² Muqararat Ahval Shakhsīyeh Masīhiyan Prutestan Dar Iran [Regulations on the Personal Affairs of Protestant Christians in Iran], art. 25, 27.

law. As the result, the National Organization for Civil Registration does not recognize the marriage of Christian converts unless it is performed according to Islamic law.

Article 1192 of the Iranian Civil Code also forbids appointing a non-Muslim as the guardian of a child.⁴³³ In at least one case, a Christian convert couple lost the custody of their stepchild because of their Christian faith. It is to be noted that according to Article 3 of the Law on the Protection of Orphaned and Abused Children and Adolescents, children who do not have guardians or have unfit guardians could be adopted by all Iranian nationals residing in Iran.⁴³⁴ This article does not specify the religion of the adopting parents. In addition, Article 6 (t) indicates that giving the custody of a child to followers of the recognized religions in the Constitution is permitted.⁴³⁵

Finally, Christian converts have been denied access to justice. The Islamic Republic not only showed no interest in investigating the murder of Christian pastors but also intimidated their families to give up seeking justice. Except for the show trial of three members of the MEK, no arrest has been made and no judicial proceedings has been initiated. At least in one instance, security officials threatened the victim's family to not communicate with others about the case, otherwise, they would be *accidentally* killed.

Conclusion

The majority of Shi'a jurists believe that Muslim-born persons are not permitted to leave Islam and embrace other religions, including Abrahamic religions. Although there are considerable disagreements and ambiguities regarding acts that could constitute apostasy, the Shi'a jurisprudence suggests that apostasy is a capital offense, punishable by death. Iranian law follows the same path and does not provide a clear and uniform definition of apostasy. In the years following the 1979 revolution, several Christian converts have been charged with this crime.

Christian converts not only have been denied the right to practice their religion openly, freely, and without fear of repression, but they have also encountered the Iranian government's repressive and discriminatory policies and practices. Christian converts have been labeled as unrecognized or unofficial, their properties have been seized without compensation, and their due process rights have been violated. Several pastors and Christian converts were murdered, many were sent behind bars, and many were forced to go into exile. The Iranian governments' actions in the prosecution of Christian converts are contrary to international human rights law and Iran's Constitution.

⁴³³ Qanuni Manadi [Civil Code], art. 1192.

⁴³⁴ Qanuni Hemayat Az Kudakan Va Nujavanan Bi Sarparast Va Bad Sarparast [Law on the Protection of Orphaned and Abused Children and Adolescents], Tehran 1392 [2013], art. 3, <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/866926>

⁴³⁵ Article 6 (a), however, enumerates "performing religious duties and abstaining from prohibitions" as one of the eligibility requirements for adopting a child. In considering the legislative context in Iran, this Article may suggest the Islamic religious duties and prohibitions and exclude non-Muslims. See Qanuni Hemayat Az Kudakan Va Nujavanan Bi Sarparast Va Bad Sarparast [Law on the Protection of Orphaned and Abused Children and Adolescents], art. 6 (a), (t).

Methodology

IHRDC gathered and analyzed information for this report from the following sources:

Testimony of victims and witnesses. IHRDC interviewed five witnesses for this report. Three of the witnesses are currently in exile in Turkey, and two witnesses are living in the United States.

Documents issued by non-governmental organizations. Reports and press releases from different human rights organizations have been used in drafting this report.

Academic articles and books. Books and articles written by or about Christian converts in Iran have been consulted and cited in this report.

Religious Resources. The Ayatollahs' fatwas regarding converting to Christianity were reviewed and cited in the report. Their responses to religious inquiries are accessible online on different websites affiliated with the Qom seminary.

Government Documents. The Iranian Constitution, the latest version of the Islamic Penal Code, and other legislations and documents issued by the Iranian government have been used as appropriate.

Media reporting. Various Iranian media sources, as well as non-Iranian media sources, have been used to provide details and context for this report.

Where the report cites or relies on information provided by government actors or other involved parties, it specifies the source of such information and evaluates the information considering the relative reliability of each source. The IHRDC has meticulously cross-checked all the sources of information used to compile this report to ensure their credibility and accuracy.

All names of places, people, organizations, etc. in the footnotes originally written in Persian have been transliterated using the system of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES), available at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/information/author-resources/ijmes-translation-and-transliteration-guide>

Appendix A – Fatwas

143069p Inbox

fatwa <fatwa@leader.ir> Tue, Dec 8, 2009 at 8:39 AM

To: Istifta Sender <mhaghnejad@gmail.com>

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سلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته

بسمه تعالی

در فرض مذکور خود او مرتد است و احکام ارتداد مترتب می‌شود و لکن از نوازش اگر بعد از ارتداد بوده و مطابق با شریعت خودش صورت گرفته، صحیح است و فرزندان آنها حلال‌زاده هستند و احکام ارتداد را ندارند.

موفق و مؤید باشید.

----- Original Message -----

From: fatwa@leader.ir

To: fatwa@leader.ir

Sent: 2009/12/02 01:08 ق.ظ

Subject: Istifta

استفتاء نمایران پایگاه اطلاع رسانی دفتر مقام معظم رهبری	
موضوع استفتاء: مسأله متروکه	زمان ارسال: ۱۱/۰۹/۱۳۸۸
جنسیت: مرد	
ایمیل: mhaghnejad@gmail.com	
محل استفتاء:	

با سلام

اگر کسی مسلمان زاده باشد حتی سید و سادات اما در سنی که می‌باید بین خود را برگزیند پس از تحقیق و تخصص بسیار مسیحیت یا یکی از دیگر مذاهب اهل کتاب را انتخاب میکند یعنی پس از بلوغ اسلام را اختیار نکرده حکم او در خصوص حقوق اجتماعی چیست؟ البته به صلح و تفاهت بوده و عواقب آن را پذیرفته است، حال او با زوجه ای چون خود از نوازش کرده با همان شرایط فوق التکر و صاحب فرزند شده اند حکم فرزند ایشان چیست؟ و از چه حقوق اجتماعی ای بر خوردن می‌شود؟ نود ایشان نیز از چنین از نوازی می‌آید و این گروه و عده به همین عنوان شکل بگیرند و جمعیتی به شمول می‌یابند و همگی خود را مسیحی دانسته و به انظوری نیز تعلیم یافته اند چه حقوقی در جامعه اسلامی بر ایشان قابل استنادی در تحصیل از نوازش شکل انجام نامسک دینی و ... خود چطور برای مثال حکم آن عده از مسیحیان اسپانیا که از اجاد مسلمان اندلسی هستند اما امروزه دیگر به نین اجادی خود نیستند چیست؟ امروز حکم ربیب جمهور وقت آمریکا آقای باراک حسین اوباما که از پیری مسلمان بنیاد آمده ولی خود را مسیحی می‌پندارند چیست؟ و مسلمانان می‌باید چه برخوردی با او داشته باشند؟ از نظر شرعی چه حکمی دارد تغییر نام برای چنین افرادی چگونه است؟ مثلا بجای اسمی که پدران شان برایشان گذاشته اند میخواهند نام شانگردان و با سایر اسمی کتاب مقدسی دیگر را برای خود و فرزندان شان برگزینند، چطور؟ باشکر

Item 1, page 1 – The first *istiftā* [religious question] sent by Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad to the Office of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in December 2009. He asked two questions. First, if someone was born Muslim, but later decided to follow Christianity or other Abrahamic religions, what is the ruling about his or her social rights? Second, if such a person married another former Muslim and they had children, what are the social rights of their children? Haghnejad also mentioned two real-world examples; Andalusian Christians who have Muslim ancestors, and President Obama who practices Christianity, although his father was Muslim.

In response, the Supreme Leader’s Office described the former Muslim as “apostate.” But, despite this, provided that if the marriage took place after the apostasy and was in accordance with the laws of his or her new religion, then, the marriage is correct and their children are legitimately born, and the rules of apostasy are not applicable to them.

----- Forwarded message -----

From: "leader.ir" <fatwa@leader.ir>

Date: Wed, 13 Jan 2010 17:36:56 +0380

Subject: Leader.ir (Istifta)

To: mhaghnejad@gmail.com

نام و نام خانوادگی: عبدالرضا حق نژاد

پست الکترونیکی: mhaghnejad@gmail.com

موضوع: مسائل متفرقه

شماره استفتاء: 146630

بسمه تعالی

سلام علیکم و رحمة الله و بركاته

تابع دینی است که فرزندان اختیار می‌کنند

موفق و مؤید بالتبید

پا سلام با تشکر از پاسخ شما در خصوص مسئله قبلی با شماره پاسخ ۱۴۳۰۶

حال سوال اینجا است فرزندان این افراد که مطابق تعالیم مسیح رشد کرده اند

و حکم ارتداد را ندارند آیا از اقلیت مذهبی در این کشور محسوب می‌شوند

حکم این بچه‌ها چیست؟ و قانون می‌باید مطابق اقلیت‌های مذهبی با ایشان در

مدرسه، دانشگاه، خدمت سربازی، شغل‌های دولتی و رای‌گیری‌های مجلس... با

ایشان برخورد نماید؟ از حسن ظن شما متشکرم

Item 2, page 1 – The second *istiftā* sent by Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad to the Office of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in January 2010. Based on the response to the first *istiftā*, the rules of apostasy are not applicable to the children of former Muslims. Accordingly, Haghnejad asked, whether these children are considered a “religious minority,” and therefore, could enjoy the constitutional rights?

The Office of Supreme Leader responded that the enjoyment of the rights guaranteed for recognized religious minorities in the Constitution depends on “the religion that the children chose.”



نام: عبدالرضا
جنسیت: مرد
آدرس:
نام خانوادگی: حق نژاد
سن:
ایمیل: mhaghnejad@gmail.com

سؤال: با سلام. مرد مسلمان زاده‌ای تا سن ۱۹ سالگی نه اظهار اسلام نموده و نه به اسلام اقرار نموده است و حتی هیچ یک از تکالیف شرعی اسلام را عمل ننموده است. در سن ۱۹ سالگی دین مسیحیت را به عنوان اولین دین خود انتخاب نموده و در خصوص اسلام چون شناختی از اسلام ندارد. نفیاً یا اثباتاً نسبت به پیامبر و اصول اسلام هیچ گونه نظری ندارد. ولی اعتقاد به توحید و معاد دارد. آیا چنین شخصی مرتد است؟

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

ج: علیکم السلام ورحمة الله

بسیار جای تأسف است اگر چنین واقع شده که مسلمانی تا ۱۹ سالگی شناختی از اسلام نداشته است. در هر صورت تا چیزی که دلالت بر انکار نبوت حضرت ختمی مرتبت صلی الله علیه و آله از او ظاهر نشود مرتد محسوب نمی‌شود. والله العالم خداوند همه را به کسب معرفت صحیح هدایت فرماید ۲۱ شوال المکرم ۱۴۳۱



Item 3, page 1 – The *istiftā* sent by Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad to the Office of Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani in October 2010. He discussed the following hypothesis: a young man was born Muslim, but never has identified himself as a Muslim and does not practice Islam. He has no opinion for or against the Prophet Mohammad and the principles of Islam. He became Christian and believes in monotheism and resurrection. Is such a person an apostate?

In response, the Office of Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani provided that he is not considered an apostate unless there is evidence that he has denied the revelation to the Prophet Mohammad.

From: <answer@saanei.net>
Date: 2010/9/22
Subject: پاسخ نامه شماره [101743] دفتر حضرت آية الله العظمى صائغی
To: mhaghnejad@gmail.com

باسمه تعالی

با عرض سلام؛

ج- مرتد کسی است که بعد از اظهار اسلام، خدا یا رسالت پیامبر را به نحوی انکار کند که به بی احترامی و هتک و تکذیب پیامبر (صلی الله علیه وآله) و نسبت غلط دادن به میلیونها مسلمان برگردد؛ و اما کسی را که در حال تکفیر و تفحص است، ظاهراً نمی توان حکم به ارتداد نمود، چه رمد به مسئله قتل و اعدام؛ بعلت، قتل و اعدام از وظایف حاکم است که خود باید موضوع و حکم را تشخیص دهد.



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mhaghnejad@gmail.com
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38
اطلاع یا
پیامک
کشور
Iran Islamic Republic of
موضوع
ارسال سوالات شرعی

با سلام مرد مسلمان زاده ای تا سن 19 سالگی نه اظهار اسلام نموده و نه به اسلام اقرار نموده است و حتی هیچ يك از تکالیف شرعی اسلام را عمل ننموده است . در سن 19 سالگی دین مسیحیت را به عنوان اولین دین خود انتخاب نموده ، و در خصوص اسلام چون هتاختی از اسلام ندارد ، نفی "یا ایها التائبا" نسبت به پیامبر و اصول اسلام هیچ گونه نظری ندارد ، ولی اعتقاد به توحید و معاد دارد . آیا چنین شخصی مرتد است ؟

[/http://saanei.org](http://saanei.org)



Item 4, page 1 – The *istiftā* sent by Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad to the Office of Ayatollah Yousef Saanei in September 2010. He discussed the following hypothesis: a young man was born Muslim, but never has identified himself as a Muslim and does not practice Islam. He has no opinion for or against the Prophet Mohammad and the principles of Islam. He became Christian and believes in monotheism and resurrection. Is such a person an apostate?

In response, the Office of Ayatollah Yousef Saanei provided that an apostate is a person who denies God or the mission of the Prophet Mohammad after practicing Islam in such a way that his action is considered as disrespecting, insulting, and denying the Prophet Mohammad, and also, is considered as giving a false label to millions of Muslims. But the person who explores religions, apparently, cannot be condemned to apostasy, let alone being killed or sentenced to the death penalty, which is a responsibility reserved to a judge, as opposed to a punishment that can be carried out without a judicial process.