

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

[Home](#)[> Research Program](#)[> Responses to Information Requests](#)

Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment please email Basesdedonnees.DatabaseUnit@irb-cisr.gc.ca.

18 March 2014

IRN104787.E

Iran: Teachings, interpretations and knowledge of Christianity among non-ethnic Christians.
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Background

According to a publication about Protestants and Christian converts in Iran, written by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI), an independent New York-based non-profit organization that aims to promote human rights in Iran through research and international media advocacy (ICHRI n.d.), the majority of Christians in Iran are "ethnic Christians, which refers to Armenians and the Assyrians (or Chaldeans) who possess their own linguistic and cultural traditions" (ICHRI 2013, 6). ICHRI states that "most ethnic Christians are members of their community's Orthodox church" (ibid.), "but some are also Catholics or Protestants" (ibid., 17). According to ICHRI, "[n]on-ethnic Christians are for the most part members of Protestant churches" (ibid., 6). Sources similarly indicate that non-ethnic Christians are mostly "Protestants and Evangelicals" (Minority Rights Group International n.d.; FIDH July 2010, 25). The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) states that "many [non-ethnic Christians] are converts from Islam (ibid.). ICHRI also says that "most, though not all [non-ethnic Christians], are converts who came from Muslim backgrounds" (2013, 6).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a senior researcher in the Human Rights in Iran Unit at Brooklyn College, City University of New York, indicated that the experiences of ethnic and non-ethnic Christians in Iran are "entirely different" (21 Feb. 2014). The ICHRI states that "authorities have granted ethnic Christians some rights to religious practice, such as holding their church services, running religious schools, and celebrating their major religious holidays," though they are not permitted to hold Persian language services (ICHRI 2013, 6). According to the UN *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, "[i]n general, Christian religious practice is monitored and heavily regulated. For example, Muslim converts to Christianity cannot enter Armenian or Assyrian Churches, as all churchgoers must register with the Government. Authorities often place cameras in churches..." (UN 13 Mar. 2014, 80)

ICHRI indicates that Protestants face "far more aggressive government restrictions and human rights abuses than ethnic Christian groups" (ibid.). ICHRI states that this is "largely" due to the use of the Persian language for church services and literature, "their commitment to proselytizing," which may "facilitate conversion," as well as potential affiliations with church networks located abroad (ibid.). The BBC reports that "[e]vangelical Christians are not recognised and face heavy discrimination" (11 Oct. 2011). According to the report by the UN Special Rapporteur, "The Christians most commonly prosecuted appear to be converts from Muslim backgrounds or those that proselytize or minister to Iranian Muslims. Iranian authorities at the highest levels have designated house churches and evangelical Christians as threats to national security" (UN 13 Mar. 2014, 11). The UN Special Rapporteur adds that

[i]n recent years, Christians, many of whom are converts from Muslim backgrounds, have faced a similar pattern of persecution. At least 49 Christians were reportedly being detained in the Islamic Republic of Iran as at January 2014. In 2013 alone, the authorities reportedly arrested at least 42 Christians, of whom 35 were convicted for participation in informal "house churches", association with churches outside the Islamic Republic of Iran, perceived or real evangelical activity, and other standard Christian activities. Sentences range from one to 10 years of imprisonment. (ibid. 10-11)

2. Denominations

Sources indicate that some non-ethnic Christians in Iran identify with denominations, and some do not (Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014; Pastor 24 Feb. 2014). The Pastor indicated that some non-ethnic Christians may or may not know about the existence of different denominations (ibid.). The Pastor also said that whether or not a non-ethnic Iranian Christian knows their denomination depends on the person mentoring them (ibid.). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the President of Iranian Christians International (ICI), a non-profit Colorado-based evangelical Christian group that "ministers to the approximately 8 million Iranians and Afghans living outside their countries today" (ICI n.d.), indicated that "most house churches" do not focus on the issue of denomination; they teach their own theology and doctrine, but will not necessarily specify which denomination they belong to (26 Feb. 2014).

The senior researcher indicated that there are many ways that non-ethnic Iranian Christians identify or describe themselves, for example, some may identify as Protestant, Pentecostal or another denomination, while others may identify as Evangelical or belonging to the Evangelical movement, Proselytizing, or belonging to the Assembly of God, an Evangelical Iranian group, an International Christian movement, the International set of churches (an international church network), or a Bible Church (21 Feb. 2014). The senior researcher added that many of these terms are not commonly used in Persian and may be challenging to translate to English (21 Feb. 2014). Sources also indicated that some non-ethnic Christians identify themselves as being a follower of a particular Christian television channel, television personality or televangelist (Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014; Pastor 24 Feb. 2014).

According to the senior researcher, although some Iranian converts take a theological meaning of Christianity, some others take a social meaning from the religion (21 Feb. 2014). The senior researcher said that sometimes Christianity is defined as a way of moving away from social norms that people find to be restrictive in Iran, and moving towards a form of social liberation (21 Feb. 2014). The Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission indicated that, according to an international organization in Ankara, in some cases "the appeal lies less in Christianity as such and more in being part of a community which is warm and welcoming" (Feb. 2014, 17).

Sources indicated that some non-ethnic Christians define Christianity in relation to Islam (Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014; Pastor 24 Feb. 2014; ICI 26 Feb. 2014). The Pastor indicated that some Iranians convert to Christianity because of their "hatred of Islam rather than for their love of Jesus" (ibid.). The President of ICI similarly stated that some people convert to Christianity and other religions as a rebellion (26 Feb. 2014). The Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission indicated that, according to a source, "a large number of people in Iran are fed up with the way political Islam is practiced by the regime and are looking for alternatives" (Feb. 2014, 16).

Two sources note the active presence of Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons in Iran (ICI 26 Feb. 2014; Pastor 24 Feb. 2014), as well as other "non-conventional forms of Christianity" (ibid.).

3. Teachings and Interpretations of Christianity

Sources indicate that there is great variance in the way Christianity is interpreted by non-ethnic protestant and converted Christians in Iran (Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014; Pastor 24 Feb. 2014). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Pastor of the Iranian Church of Richmond Hill in Toronto, who received his ministry credentials with the Evangelical Free Church of Canada, said that interpretations of Christianity are based on a person's denomination and how he or she learns about Christianity (ibid.; ibid. 21 Mar. 2014). According to the senior researcher, for non-ethnic Christians, there are many differences in the practices, teachings and knowledge of Christianity, and a person's identification with the religion (21 Feb. 2014).

Several sources indicate that there can be a range of knowledge about Christianity among non-ethnic Christians in Iran (ICI 26 Feb. 2014; Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014; Pastor 24 Feb. 2014). The Pastor indicated that a person's knowledge of Christianity is dependent on the type of exposure they have had to Christianity (24 Feb. 2014). The senior researcher said that Iranian non-ethnic Christians do not grow up in a Christian-centred society (21 Feb. 2014). The President of ICI indicated that sometimes the information that converts have received about Christianity comes from teachings in Islam, which are not the same as Christian

teachings (26 Feb. 2014). The senior researcher indicated that some non-ethnic Christians are ordained outside of Iran or have otherwise acquired a high level of Christian education, while others know very little about Christianity (21 Feb. 2014). A fact-finding mission conducted by the Danish Refugee Council, LANDINFO, and the Danish Immigration Service indicates that, according to an international organization in Ankara, "converts may not be very knowledgeable about Christianity" (Denmark and Norway Feb. 2013, 17). A senior legal advisor at the Swedish Migration Board interviewed by the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), and evangelical news outlet (CBN n.d.), said that "not all converts have a deeper knowledge or details about the religion" (ibid. 14 June 2013).

Sources indicate that some non-ethnic Iranian Christians do not believe in the Trinity (Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014; Denmark and Norway Feb. 2013, 18). According to the President of ICI, there are some groups who present Christianity through an Islamic lens, such as the "Jesus-only group," who does not believe in the Trinity (26 Feb. 2014). The Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission similarly states that "many of the house churches in Iran are non-Trinitarian which means that they believe in 'Jesus only'" making them "quite different from established Protestantism" (Feb. 2013, 15, 18).

4. Practices

4.1 House Churches

Sources report that some non-ethnic Iranian Christians attend house churches (Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014; Pastor 24 Feb. 2014). The Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission to Iran reports that, according to a Western embassy, "established churches effectively do not accept converts and consequently, converts are pushed to the underground house churches" (Feb. 2013, 17). The President of ICI also indicated that some converts attend house churches (26 Feb. 2014).

The President of ICI indicated that pastors of house churches are "usually not well trained" (26 Feb. 2014). The senior researcher noted that some house churches have Bible classes, some of which are taught by new Christians themselves, and some house churches are "non-traditional," and may be led by clergy without a theological understanding (21 Feb. 2014). The President of ICI indicated that the knowledge of Christianity gained in house churches varies, and depends on which house church a person has attended (26 Feb. 2014). He added that there may be many gaps in knowledge among Christians who attend house churches, as their teachings may be, in his view, "incomplete and insufficient" (26 Feb. 2014).

Several sources indicate that some Iranian house church leaders are trained abroad (Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014; Denmark and Norway Feb. 2013, 20; Pastor 24 Feb. 2014). The Pastor indicated that sometimes leaders of churches are trained in Turkey or Armenia (24 Feb. 2014). The senior researcher also stated that sometimes people who teach in house churches attend seminars in Turkey, Armenia or elsewhere and learn about Christian teachings and how to promote conversions (21 Feb. 2014). The Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission adds that, according to an Iranian leader of a home church network, training of leaders of house churches can also occur through television satellite channels (Feb. 2013, 20). According to the same source, leaders also "rely on informal modes of learning through personal mentoring, a sort of apprenticeship that also involves the reading of theological books and learning from more knowledgeable and experienced leaders" (ibid.).

According to the Pastor, there is a limited number of people preaching and providing Christian teachings in Iran, which has led to, in his opinion, some "bad teachings" and misunderstandings about Christianity (24 Feb. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4.2 Television Satellite Stations

Several sources report that there are Christian television satellite stations that broadcast in Iran (Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014; Pastor 24 Feb. 2014; ICI 26 Feb. 2014). The Pastor explained that this is because of the lack of freedom to teach Christianity to non-ethnic Christians (24 Feb. 2014). The senior researcher indicates that some people's concept of conversion is just following a Christian television show because some non-ethnic Iranian Christians may not have access to other Christians, and may therefore acquire their "entire understanding" of Christianity from a Christian television show (21 Feb. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4.3 Christian Materials

Sources indicate that Christian Bibles are confiscated in Iran (US 20 May 2013, 4; Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014). The Senior Researcher indicated that Persian-language bibles are confiscated, mostly from house churches (ibid. 26 Mar. 2014). The Senior Researcher added that, although the government allows one

translation of the Persian language bible with an Islamic interpretation, Persian-speaking Protestants generally do not use this version (ibid.). The Pastor indicated that if someone has a Bible, they can get into "big trouble" and that Bibles are "not readily available" (24 Feb. 2014). However, in contrast, the senior researcher indicated that most non-ethnic Christians have Bibles (21 Feb. 2014).

According to the senior researcher, the Persian translation of the Bible is not printed in Iran (21 Feb. 2014). The President of ICI said that some churches print small quantities of Bibles, but this can be dangerous (26 Feb. 2014). The President of ICI said that, although Bibles were smuggled in before, "in recent years" there is less smuggling because it is expensive and sometimes shipments are confiscated (26 Feb. 2014).

The President of ICI indicated that although hard copies of Bibles are not very accessible, Bibles can be accessed online (26 Feb. 2014). He added that internet speeds are intentionally slow, and it is difficult to download documents (ICI 26 Feb. 2014). The Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission to Iran reports that, according to Elam Ministries, a UK-based evangelist Christian organization that aims to "strengthen and expand" Christianity in Iran by accelerating church growth and training Iranian church leaders (Elam n.d.), access to materials is inhibited by the "filtering and blocking" of websites by the authorities (Feb. 2013, 20-21). According to the ICHRI, "Persian-language Christian websites are blocked, and the four Persian language Christian satellite stations are intermittently jammed" (2013, 11). However, according to the President of ICI, Christians from non-ethnic backgrounds can do research about Christianity "on their own," as information about Christianity is available on the Internet (26 Feb. 2014). The senior researcher indicated some non-ethnic Christians have DVDs which contain Christian materials, such as songs and videos (21 Feb. 2014). The Senior Researcher said that some people convert "before ever touching a Bible," and then later absorb Christian materials (21 Feb. 2014).

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4.4 Christian Holidays

The Pastor expressed the view that knowledge of Christian holidays may be limited for non-ethnic Iranian Christians, depending on their exposure to Western culture and events, which are "heavily influenced" by Christian traditions (24 Feb. 2014). The Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission similarly indicates that most conversions are directly related to the reading of the Bible. Converts, as a result, are readily referring to the source, i.e. the Bible, and the stories that are encountered in it and perhaps not so much to the well-known religious holidays that Christians generally refer to. It was explained that there is no mention of an actual Christmas celebration in the Bible. The Christmas celebration is a tradition that emerged later on in history after Christianity had been embraced as state religion. It is thus a product of Christian culture more than of biblical faith. Also according to the Bible, the Easter story of Jesus death and resurrection is commemorated consistently by Christians every Sunday, forming the central theme of sermons and through the sharing of communion (bread and wine). Easter of course was also observed by Jews in biblical times, being rooted in the Old Testament story of Israel's deliverance out of Egypt. Consequently, the theological meaning of why Jesus came and why he died and rose again is the very core of what Iranian converts believe and celebrate consistently. However, the significance lies in the meaning of these stories for their personal lives and relationship with God, rather than in the way these events may be celebrated at special occasions during the year. The Christian holidays tend to get more attention in societies that have a historical cultural heritage of Christianity and thus follow the Christian calendar. (Denmark and Norway Feb. 2013, 14)

The Pastor indicated that some non-ethnic Christians in Iran practice on Friday, because it is a day off in Iran (24 Feb. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4.5 Baptisms

According to the senior researcher, not all non-ethnic Christians are baptized (21 Feb. 2014). The President of ICI indicated that baptisms of non-ethnic Christians are "not done in Iran these days" because the government said that a person who performs baptisms will be subject to severe punishment (26 Feb. 2014). The Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission found that, according to the Assembly of God [reportedly "a recognized church that operates in Persian" in Iran (ICHRI 2013, 66)], they stopped baptizing Muslims some years ago (Denmark and Norway 2013, 13). Reference was made to a pastor that had been locked up for baptizing prior to this, and it was added that baptism is not a requirement in order to become a member of the Assembly of God Church (ibid.). The senior researcher similarly indicated that ethnic churches "more or less" stopped baptizing non-ethnic Christians, however this "doesn't mean that it does not happen secretly" (26 Mar. 2014). The senior researcher added that conducting baptisms is perceived to be dangerous and individuals in the church fear reprisals (21 Feb. 2014). The Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission to Iran

found that, according to an international organization in Ankara "many of the house church members are not baptized as baptism is the proof of conversion" and the consequences someone could face are "serious, according to the law" (Feb. 2013, 14). The President of the ICI indicated punishment may include the death penalty (26 Feb. 2014). Similarly, the ICHRI reports that Iranian authorities perceive apostasy as a crime "punishable by death" (2013, 7).

The Pastor indicated although Iranian pastors living in Iran normally do not baptize Muslims because of the dangers, some non-ethnic Christians may "still be baptized" in Iran (24 Feb. 2014; Pastor 21 Mar. 2014). The Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission states that, according to an elder from the International Protestant Church of Ankara, sometimes house churches may baptize someone (Feb. 2013, 15). The senior researcher also said that some people are baptized in house churches "depending on the house church," and added that the decision of whether to baptize someone lies with the defacto leader of the house church (Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014). He added that some non-ethnic Christians who have been baptized consider themselves to have converted to Christianity before they were baptized (ibid.).

Several sources indicate that some non-ethnic Christians are baptized outside of Iran, such as in Turkey (Senior Researcher 21 Feb. 2014; Pastor 24 Feb. 2014; ICI 26 Feb. 2014), or Armenia and Azerbaijan (Denmark and Norway 2013, 13). The President of ICI indicated that, in his view, this process "may take some time" as the Pastor would build a relationship with the person to ensure that their request for baptism is "genuine" (ibid.).

The Pastor indicated that many non-ethnic Christians, even if they were baptized, will not have baptismal records (Pastor 24 Feb. 2014). He said that, if a baptismal record is given to authorities, the record would incriminate the person who was baptized, and the person who performed the baptism and signed the record would "face problems with the regime" (ibid.). The Pastor added that some non-ethnic Christians who have been baptized might receive their baptismal records late, such as when they are leaving Iran or when they have left Iran (ibid.). He also said that letters of baptism "may come from a third party," such as American Christian organizations which are connected with underground churches and baptize Iranians in secret (Pastor 24 Feb. 2014; ibid. 21 Mar. 2014). According to the Danish and Norwegian fact-finding mission to Iran, referring to a source from the Assembly of God:

[r]egarding documentation of baptism, the source considered it very unlikely that established churches would issue such documents. Whether house churches would issue such documents, the source considered that they might baptize each other within the movement but that they have no formal theological education and they are very much on their own. Finally, the source stated that the source could not imagine that any official church leader would baptize Muslims formally and officially. (Denmark and Norway Feb. 2013, 13)

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). 11 October 2011. "Guide: Christians in the Middle East." <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15239529>> [Accessed 11 Mar. 2014]

Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) News. 14 June 2013. Dale Hurd. "Sweden Grants Iran Christian Reza Jabbari Asylum." <<http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2013/March/Sweden-Deports-Iranian-Christians-to-Face-Persecution/>> [Accessed 3 Mar. 2014]

_____. N.d. "Our Ministries: CBN Partners." <<http://www.cbn.com/partners/about/our-ministries/>> [Accessed 3 Mar. 2014]

Denmark and Norway. February 2013. Danish Refugee Council, LANDINFO, Danish Immigration Service. *On Conversion to Christianity, Issues Concerning Kurds and Post-2009 Election Protestors As Well As Legal Issues and Exit Procedures. Joint Report from the Danish Immigration service, the Norwegian Landinfo and Danish Refugee Council's Fact-finding Mission to Tehran, Iran, Ankara, Turkey and London, United Kingdom. 9 November to 20 November 2012 and 8 January to 9 January 2013.* <<http://www.nyidanmark.dk/NR/rdonlyres/A8C2C897-1CA9-49D1-BA32-EC3E599D646D/0/Iranendeligudgave.pdf>> [Accessed 3 Mar. 2014]

Elam. N.d. "Elam's Mission." <<https://www.elam.com/page/elams-mission>> [Accessed 11 Mar. 2014]

International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI). 2013. *The Cost of Faith: Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran*. <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/Christians_report_Final_for-web.pdf> [Accessed 5 Mar. 2014]

_____. N.d. "Background." <<http://www.iranhumanrights.org/background-2/>> [Accessed 5 Mar. 2014]

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). July 2010. *Discrimination Against Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Iran*. <<http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=4c8622f72>> [Accessed 18 Mar. 2014]

Iran Christians International (ICI). 26 February 2014. Telephone interview with the President.

_____. N.d. "Who Is ICI?" <<http://www.iranchristians.org/>> [Accessed 5 Mar. 2014]

Minority Rights Group International. N.d. "Christians." World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples. <<http://www.minorityrights.org/5109/iran/christians.html>> [Accessed 18 Mar. 2014]

Pastor, Iranian Church of Richmond Hill, Toronto, Canada. 24 February 2014. Telephone interview.

_____. 21 March 2014. Telephone interview.

Senior Researcher, Human Rights in Iran Unit, Brooklyn College, City University of New York. 21 February 2014. Telephone interview.

_____. 26 March 2014. Telephone interview.

United Nations (UN). 13 March 2014. Human Rights Council. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. A/HRC/25/61. <http://shaheedoniran.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/A-HRC-25-61_.pdf> [Accessed 18 Mar. 2014]

United States (US). 20 May 2013. Department of State. "Iran." *International Religious Freedom Report for 2012*. <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/208600.pdf>> [Accessed 5 Mar. 2014]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact the following organizations were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: Assemblies of God World Missions, Pars Theological Centre, Toronto Iranian Christian Church. A Pastor of an Iranian church in Toronto was unable to provide information for this Response.

Internet sites, including: Ecol.net; Factiva; Freedom House; Huffington Post; Iran – Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Office of the Supreme Leader Sayyid Ali Khamenei; Iranian Christian Television Channel; Russia Today; United Nations – Refworld; World Christian Database.

[Tips on how to use this search engine.](#)

[Top of Page](#)

Date modified: 2014-06-11

The attached reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada. The reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the Government of Canada.