

# Persecution of Christians in Iran 2023: Escalating Rights Violations

Graeme Swincer<sup>1</sup>, August 2023

## Introduction

In May 2016 I published an article<sup>2</sup> which highlighted several up-to-date high-level reports on the deteriorating Human Rights situation in Iran. The article concluded:

***What is most disturbing is that there seem to be few signs of improvement. Women, perceived dissidents, ethnic and religious minorities and youth are all vulnerable to discrimination and worse. The overwhelming body of evidence points to a continuation of flagrant breaches of human rights in the past year.***

Later that year I complemented that article with a paper focusing on the criteria being used by decision makers to reject refugee asylum claims based on apostasy, especially of Iranians.

*“Genuineness and Reputation in relation to Iranian Apostates”*<sup>3</sup>. This paper quoted from the American Center for Law and Justice, which concluded that: ***“It is unquestionable that persecution of Christians is on the rise.”*** [emphasis added]. It declared that:

*in summary, the evidence shows that “traditional” Christians (mainly Assyrians, Armenians, and Catholics) who are an historically tolerated group (as long as they do not use Parsi language in their services) are now living precariously, and many are choosing to flee from Iran. But even more exposed to oppression and danger are “apostates”, both those who have abandoned Islamic allegiance and practice without embracing an alternative major religion, and those who have taken the next step, aligning themselves as Christians. Identified apostates do not have to be established leaders or “proselytisers” to attract attention, but many are prepared to take the risk. An important aspect is the escalation of persecution since the disputed Presidential election of June 2009.*

I have continued to monitor the development of the foreshadowed rise in persecution and wrote an unpublished essay on the subject in April 2020: *“Update Notes on Persecution of Christians in Iran”*, included here as an attachment. This essay brought to light an authoritative book: *“Too Many to Jail: The Story of Iran’s New Christians”*<sup>4</sup>, published in 2014, which makes the point that the intensified persecution to that point had not prevented a rapid increase in conversions to Christianity. Many converts are prepared to remain in Iran and risk suffering for their faith while many others choose to flee to other countries. The choice taken is personal and should not be evaluated in moral terms. The point is that there is intense opposition to conversion to Christianity in Iran and part of the practical implementation of that policy is concerted monitoring of churches. The book states that the Ministry of Intelligence and Security has a vast budget and many staff; no expense is spared to monitor the activities of Christians. *“Phones are bugged, suspects are trailed, and when Christians are arrested their laptops and mobiles are confiscated so contact lists can be analysed.”*<sup>5</sup> *“The security forces that harass the church . . . interrogate”* arrested Christians *“for hours in order to get more information about the house churches. They also trawl through thousands of emails and files from the computers they have confiscated from Christians”*<sup>6</sup>. Chapter 8 of the book documents the escalating persecution and shows that punishment is not limited to church leaders; ordinary members are very vulnerable too. It seems to be applied in an arbitrary fashion and is often extremely brutal. The risk is high and the consequences are extreme.

This phenomenon continues unabated and there have been countless reports on the subject over the past three years. This article is an attempt to summarise that information and highlight the main points.

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<sup>2</sup> *Recent reports of deteriorating Human Rights in Iran*, May 2016, <http://www.bmrsg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Update-Iran-May-2016.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://bmrsg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Genuineness-and-Reputation-in-relation-to-Iranian-Apostates.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Mark Bradley, Lion Hudson, 2014

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, page 17

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, page 33

## Escalating Rights Violations

**The central theme of all recent reports on persecution of Christians in Iran is escalating rights violations.**

1. Perhaps the most comprehensive recent statement on the persecution of Christians in Iran is the fifth joint annual report (25 pages), released on 19 February 2023, by Article18<sup>7</sup> with partner organisations Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Middle East Concern, and Open Doors International: *“Rights Violations against Christians in Iran”*<sup>8</sup>. The report is well summarised in the shorter release article<sup>9</sup> which declares that

**. . . while it is no longer common for Iranian Christians to be killed for their faith, the report shows clearly that, contrary to the claims of the Islamic Republic, there is still no religious freedom in Iran today.**

**Instead, religious minorities including Christians – both the “recognised” Christians of Armenian and Assyrian descent, and unrecognised converts – are systematically deprived of their right to freely practise a faith of their choosing, in violation of Iran’s obligations as a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.**

Of special significance has been the consequences of recent tightening of the national legal framework. In February 2021, Iranian lawmakers amended Articles 499 and 500 of the Penal Code, paving the way for converts to be handed sentences of five years in prison for *“engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam”*. Those convicted under Article 500 are often given supplementary punishments, including fines and deprivation of social rights, in addition to custodial sentences.

The report details 57 cases of Christian converts being trapped by these amended laws: detained and subjected to cruel treatment. At least 30 Christians endured imprisonment or exile in 2022 – the same number as 2021 – while there were more than double the number of arrests: 134 in 2022 compared to 59 in 2021. There was also a marked increase in the number of Christians detained – 61 in 2022, compared to 34 in 2021. At the end of 2022, at least 17 Christians remained in prison, serving sentences of up to 10 years on charges such as *“acting against national security”* and *“propaganda against the regime”*. The year 2022 also saw 49 cases of psychological torture and 98 claims of abuse and 468 individuals, including non-Christian relatives of the defendants, caught up in the Iranian justice system. **The report says the real figure is far greater because often victims do not report the violence.**

Raids on house-churches and the arrest and interrogation of their members are increasingly being conducted by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)<sup>10</sup>. Correspondingly, there have been more frequent reports of Christians suffering physical abuse during arrest and interrogation.

In the year of the famous death of Mahsa Amini (2022)<sup>11</sup> which prompted Iranians to pour onto the streets to demand justice, the cited report argues that, *“at their core, the ongoing protests*

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<sup>7</sup> Article18 is dedicated to the protection and promotion of religious freedom in Iran and advocating on behalf of its persecuted Christians. “We do this by engaging in documentation, advocacy work, raising awareness, training, and assisting victims of persecution.” The name “Article 18” refers to Article 18: **Freedom of Religion or Belief** in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states “we all have the right to our own beliefs, to have a religion, have no religion, or to change it”. Iran continues to identify as a party to the UDHR.

<sup>8</sup> [file:///D:/Iran/PARCI-Annual-Report-2023-Online%20\(1\).pdf](file:///D:/Iran/PARCI-Annual-Report-2023-Online%20(1).pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/12622/>

<sup>10</sup> Also called the *Sepah*, the IRGC is a combined arms force with its own ground forces, navy, air force, intelligence, and special forces. It also “controls” the huge and infamous volunteer militia called the *Basij*

<sup>11</sup> On 16 September 2022 the 22-year-old Mahsa Amini died in a hospital in Tehran, under suspicious circumstances. Members of the *Basij* arrested Amini for allegedly not wearing the hijab in accordance with government standards. The Law Enforcement Command of Iran stated that she had a heart attack at a police station, collapsed, and fell into a coma before being transferred to a hospital. However, eyewitnesses, including women who were detained with Amini, reported that she was severely beaten and that she died as a result of police brutality. Leaked medical scans indicated a cerebral haemorrhage or stroke.

are a cry for freedom: the freedom of the Iranian people to live in a way that corresponds with their beliefs”.

In summary, **“Aside from the protests, 2022 was another year in which Christians continued to face harassment, arrest and imprisonment only due to the peaceful practice of their faith.”**

2. This research builds on and reinforces the August 2022 report<sup>12</sup> of **eight United Nations experts** who expressed their alarm at the scale of repression against religious minorities, including in particular Baha’i faith followers, Christian converts, Gonabadi dervishes and atheists.
3. Another significant recent antecedent of the Article 18 joint report (1. above) was an October 2022 article<sup>13</sup> by veteran Middle East reporter **Benjamin Weinthal**<sup>14</sup>, commenting on a “shocking new report from **the British government**” which “details that the violent persecution of the Christian minority population continues unabated in the Islamic Republic of Iran”. The UK report said that “many arrests reportedly took place during police raids on religious gatherings” and that “Christians, particularly evangelicals and converts from Islam, continued to experience disproportionate levels of arrest and detention.”

It is worth noting that Weinthal used a statement from the UK report to serve as a title for his own commentary: **‘Simply being a Christian is enough to get you arrested’ in Iran**. The notion that only church leaders are vulnerable to persecution is now well and truly outdated.

4. The previous annual report from Article 18 and its collaborators was well highlighted and complemented by Michael Scollon of Radio Free Europe in an article entitled “*No Place For Converts: Iran’s Persecuted Christians Struggle To Keep The Faith*”<sup>15</sup>. Scollon documented the harrowing experiences of a number of Christian converts who had been targeted by the Regime. Significantly, he noted that

*The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in 2022 redesignated Iran as a “country of particular concern,” in part because it continues to “arrest, charge, sentence, and jail scores of Christians on charges including ‘propaganda against the regime.’”*

5. The cited joint report (1. above) was subsequently highlighted and supplemented by, among others, the authoritative French Catholic newspaper **La Croix**<sup>16</sup>, which noted that:  
*The authorities continue to raid “house churches” and publicly vilify evangelical Christians - thereby endorsing brutal security measures against them.  
. . . intelligence forces have asked leaders of these churches to hand over details of their members.  
. . . forcible closure of businesses owned by Christians, confiscation of properties, bans on employment in the public sector and denial of access to universities are also among the reported violations of freedom of religion.*

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<sup>12</sup> Iran: UN experts alarmed by escalating religious persecution | OHCHR

<sup>13</sup> ‘Simply being a Christian is enough to get you arrested’ in Iran: British government report, 31 October 2022, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/simply-being-a-christian-enough-get-you-arrested-iran-british-government-report>

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Weinthal reports on Israel, Iran, Syria, Turkey and Europe for Fox News Digital. Benjamin has contributed articles to The Wall Street Journal, The Jerusalem Post, Foreign Policy, Haaretz, Forbes and The New York Post.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Scollon, Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, 05 May 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-christian-converts-persecuted/31836143.html>

<sup>16</sup> “The Iranian regime is increasingly concerned about the spread of Christianity and see evangelical Christians as a threat, according to a new report by Christian NGOs”, 01 March 2023, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/persecution-of-christians-on-the-rise-in-iran/17387>

6. A two-part article<sup>17</sup> by **Dr Ioannis E. Kotoulas**<sup>18</sup> published in May 2023 under the banner of the **Investigate Project on Terrorism (IPT)** and **Algemeiner** provided considerable additional well researched detail on this subject. The article notes that:

*In its 2022 Annual Report, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (U SCIRF) declared that Iranian authorities continue to “arrest, charge, sentence, and jail scores of Christians on charges including ‘propaganda against the regime’ . . .*

The article also explains that hatred is stirred up against Christians by portraying them as Israeli/Western agents:

*In 2021, state-controlled Fars News described a network of Christian converts disbanded by Iranian state authorities as carrying out the “activities of a Zionist network.” It also said that the “primary aim of this network, connected with the services of the Zionist regime, was to create moral depravity and promote conversion” among the Iranian population.*

*School textbooks . . . promote anti-Western, anti-Jewish themes. The spread of Christianity is cast as a threat to Muslim nations, with the Ottoman Empire offered as an example.*

Reference is made to “state pressure on converts to return to Islam” which, Kotoulas notes,

*. . . clearly contradicts Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reads: “Everyone 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.”*

**“The decades-long rule of the theocratic regime that has isolated Iran from the world is continuing its oppressive record against Christians.”**

7. **Open Doors International** issued their own separate annual report<sup>19</sup> on 30 June 2023. This statement spelled out further detail:

*Iranian Christians may be banned from education, lose their jobs and find it very difficult to get back into employment. For women, the situation is even more precarious because Iranian law grants women few rights. If discovered as a Christian, they are likely to be violently punished or divorced by their husbands and have their children taken away from them.*

In a context that could hardly be more inhumane, the report states that

*. . . **persecution has worsened slightly in Iran.** The amendment and tightening of the penal code in 2021, which is also used to prosecute Christians, continues to be part of a wider development towards Iran becoming a totalitarian state. State surveillance is on the rise and the authorities are exerting an increasing grip on daily life and activities, an attitude reflected in the harsh responses to the protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022.*

8. Still further detail was provided in the 2023 report<sup>20</sup> of the international monitoring and support organisation **Voice of the Martyrs**. For example:

***Christians are persecuted by government authorities, which have a network of informants in each city. Family, friends and community members also persecute Christians, especially when news of a conversion becomes public.***

*. . . **Christians are routinely fired from their jobs, and it is difficult for a known believer to find a job or rent a home.***

## **Factors behind the escalating persecution**

My personal conversations with many Iranian refugees have pointed to solid consensus that a key reason for the escalating persecution of Christians in Iran is, perhaps ironically, the rapid increase in conversions to Christianity accompanied by the rapid decline in allegiance to Islam.

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<sup>17</sup> *The Persecution of Christians in Iran, Part One*<sup>17</sup>, Algemeiner, 23 May 2023, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2023/05/23/the-persecution-of-christians-in-iran/>

*Persecution of Christians in Iran, Part Two*, Algemeiner, 24 May 2023, <https://www.algemeiner.com/2023/05/24/persecution-of-christians-in-iran-part-two/>

A version of these articles was originally published by the Investigate Project on Terrorism

<sup>18</sup> Ioannis E. Kotoulas (Ph.D. in History, Ph.D. in Geopolitics) is Senior Fellow of the Investigate Project on Terrorism (IPT) and Adjunct Lecturer in Geopolitics at the University of Athens, Greece.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/iran>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.persecution.com/globalprayerguide/iran/>

In a Newsweek article<sup>21</sup> published in February 2022 researcher Lela Gilbert lent credence to that conclusion. She stated that:

*Iran's small but persistent Christian community has been growing at an unprecedented pace in recent years . . . in 2021, commentator Daniel Pipes shared the concerns of an Iranian church leader, "What if I told you the mosques are empty inside Iran? What if I told you no one follows Islam inside of Iran? . . . What if I told you the best evangelist for Jesus was the Ayatollah Khomeini [the founder of the Islamic Republic]?" An evangelical pastor, formerly an Iranian Muslim, concurred as far back as 2008: "We find ourselves facing what is more than a conversion to the Christian faith. It's a mass exodus from Islam."*

*Other outlets have echoed that Islam in Iran is on the decline. The Christian Broadcasting Network claimed in 2019 that "Christianity is growing faster in the Islamic Republic of Iran than in any other country." Shay Khatiri of Johns Hopkins University wrote last year that "**Islam is the fastest shrinking religion [in Iran], while Christianity is growing the fastest.**"*

A fundamental problem faced by the Regime is the general failure of intimidation as a strategy for silencing converts. As cited above, the book "*Too Many to Jail: The Story of Iran's New Christians*" shows that intensified persecution had not prevented a rapid increase in conversions to Christianity. This conclusion is affirmed by a detailed report<sup>22</sup> published recently by the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, which found that

***Christian are unwilling to hide their beliefs or deny who they are. They make their conversion known even though they're well aware they might lose their inheritance, and they know the threats that lie ahead of them. And this is the cue for the regime to start imposing restrictions on their private and social lives.***

Consistent with the historical record of the usually counter-productive impact of persecution on the growth of the "church"<sup>23</sup>, the impositions and threats do not have the desired effects.

The Regime has lost the battle in relation to mosque attendance, and is rapidly losing the battle in relation to the behaviour of its citizens, especially young people. The repressive and cruel policies of the Regime have not only led to widespread protests and demands for freedom, including freedoms for self-expression, but have so disgusted many young people that they have given up any remaining allegiance to Islam. Many maintain some form of pretence for the sake of family relationships and inheritance issues. And many are searching for a substitute belief system. Some of these find a solution in Christianity. This is consistent with the picture presented in my 2016 article cited above<sup>24</sup>.

*There is no doubt that hundreds of thousands of Iranians, disillusioned with extremist Islam, live in a kind of secular hypocrisy in order to find a measure of safety. The common practice of Iranians segregating their lives into public and private spheres is well documented.*

However it is now clear that previously "hidden" rejecters of extremist Islam are emboldened to protest openly against the Regime and its oppressive measures. They have become aware of their strength in numbers, and through satellite TV and the internet they are increasingly aware of both the enticing possibilities of "freedom" and the international support for their cause. The Regime is all but helpless in its attempts to counter these influences.

The illegal "house churches" are active in personal evangelism, in spite of the risks involved. And satellite TV and the internet have helped to promote the message of Christianity and to provide material for nurturing any new believers. Again, the Regime is unable to intervene effectively. Their only recourse is intensified persecution, and this is not yielding the desired impact.

## **Genuineness and Reputation**

Many Iranian refugees are among those who have abandoned Islam precisely because of the treatment they have received from the Regime or its citizens with extreme views and policies.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Precarious Circumstances of Iran's Christians*, Lela Gilbert, Newsweek, 23 February 2022

<sup>22</sup> Cited in an article "*The Islamic Republic's Intolerance to Christian Converts, Explained*" by Maryam Dehkordi, IranWire, 25 August 2021, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/70213/#:~:text=The%20Charge%20of%20Apostasy%20and%20the%20Threat%20of%20Death&text=But%20if%20a%20Muslim%20converts,sentenced%20to%20death%20in%20Iran.>

<sup>23</sup> Note for example the famous dictum of the "Early Church Father" Tertullian: "*the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church*"

<sup>24</sup> "*Genuineness and Reputation in relation to Iranian Apostates*" See footnote 2.

They arrive in Australia and other countries and before long are impressed and attracted by the alternative presented by “churches” and individual Christians related to detention centres - who display kindness and care. Many embrace Christian faith in an open fashion, but these do not always find it easy to identify a suitable and supportive faith community once they are released from immigration detention. Furthermore, the reputation they usually establish as new converts inevitably becomes known in Iran and thereby exacerbates any danger they may face if they were to return to Iran to live.

I have written several papers on the importance of distinguishing between genuineness and reputation in relation to the dangers facing Christians in Iran, including the document cited above. I believe these analyses leave no doubt that an Iranian refugee whose protection claims include reference to his or her open declaration of Christian allegiance faces extreme danger upon any circumstance of repatriation to Iran. The many potential persecutors, both official and unofficial, care nothing for sincerity or genuineness; reputation is the key and this cannot be avoided for long, whether intentionally or not. Therefore, extreme caution is demanded of decision makers; a negative decision, whether accurate or not, would certainly place the asylum claimant in extreme jeopardy. Repatriation to guaranteed danger is not an acceptable option under any circumstances. It must be added that international guidelines on apostasy demand that no-one should be expected to seek safety in silence.

## **Conclusion**

**Christians in Iran have long faced significant danger from the government and its instruments and from many informal elements of the population. Many have suffered abuse, arrest, imprisonment, torture and confiscation of property. At least since the presidential election of 2009, escalation in this reality has been documented by Human Rights organisations, governments, monitoring and support organisations, expert academic observers and investigative journalists. The most recent reports focus specifically on increasing Human Rights violations, often involving corrupt court processes. These violations are now being intensified by strong and fraudulent application of recent amendments to the national laws. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (the *Sepah*) and its notorious subsidiary the *Basij* are playing an especially dominant role in these actions. All Christians are vulnerable, not just church leaders. In spite of the attempted brutal repression, the number of declared Christians is growing rapidly. Some choose to leave the country, but many choose to remain and risk their lives for their faith. This only seems to provoke the Regime into even greater intensification of the persecution.**

**Many converts seek asylum in other countries, but many choose to remain. What is self-evident is that no avowed Christian should be forced to stay in Iran – on any grounds.**

## Attachment

### Update Notes on Persecution of Christians in Iran<sup>25</sup>

**Graeme Swincer, April 2020**

Religious persecution continues to escalate in Iran. “Traditional” Christians who are an historically tolerated group are now living precariously, and many are choosing to flee. But even more exposed to oppression and danger are “apostates”, both those who have abandoned Islamic allegiance and practice without embracing an alternative major religion, and those who have taken the next step, usually aligning themselves as Christians. In Iran the question of sincerity or authenticity hardly ever applies: at the point of identification or declaration of conversion the danger has already been established, whether inside or outside Iran. Baptism is a non-issue.

A 2013 report from the American Center for Law and Justice<sup>26</sup> “Iran Attempting to Root Out Christianity Pastor by Pastor: Staggering Truth about Persecution”<sup>27</sup> stated that *“It is unquestionable that persecution of Christians is on the rise”,* summarising that *“suspicious disappearances, beatings, torture, death threats, and murder have become astonishingly commonplace for these Christians”*.

Since then there is abundant evidence that the situation has deteriorated further. For example:

1. An authoritative book *“Too Many to Jail: The Story of Iran’s New Christians”*<sup>28</sup>, published a year later (2014), makes the point that the intensified persecution has not prevented a rapid increase in conversions to Christianity. Many converts are prepared to remain and risk suffering for their faith while many others choose to flee to other countries. The choice taken is personal and should not be evaluated in moral terms. The point is that there is intense opposition to conversion to Christianity in Iran and part of the practical implementation of that policy is concerted monitoring of churches. The book states that the Ministry of Intelligence and Security has a vast budget and many staff; no expense is spared to monitor the activities of Christians. *“Phones are bugged, suspects are trailed, and when Christians are arrested their laptops and mobiles are confiscated so contact lists can be analysed.”*<sup>29</sup> *“The security forces that harass the church . . . interrogate”* arrested Christians *“for hours in order to get more information about the house churches. They also trawl through thousands of emails and files from the computers they have confiscated from Christians”*<sup>30</sup>. Chapter 8 of the book documents the escalating persecution and shows that punishment is not limited to church leaders; ordinary members are very vulnerable too. It seems to be applied in an arbitrary fashion and is often extremely brutal. The risk is high and the consequences are extreme.
2. In June 2019 Benjamin Weinthal, veteran reporter on human rights in the Middle East, summarised a U.S. State Department report on the Iranian regime’s persecution of Christians and other minorities<sup>31</sup>. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is quoted: *“In Iran, the regime’s crackdown on Baha’is, Christians and others continues to shock the conscience”*.

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<sup>25</sup> An essay written to provide background information for migration lawyers and agents.

<sup>26</sup> Led by Chief Counsel Jay Sekulow, the American Center for Law and Justice focuses on constitutional and human rights law worldwide. Based in Washington, D.C., with affiliated offices in Israel, Russia, Kenya, France, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe, the ACLJ is pro-life and dedicated to the ideal that religious freedom and freedom of speech are inalienable, God-given rights for all people. The ACLJ engages legal, legislative, and cultural issues by implementing an effective strategy of advocacy, education, and litigation that includes representing clients before the Supreme Court of the United States and international tribunals around the globe.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Clark, July 2013, <http://aclj.org/iran/iran-attempting-christianity-pastor-staggering-truth-persecution>

<sup>28</sup> Mark Bradley, Lion Hudson, 2014

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, page 17

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, page 33

<sup>31</sup> “Iranian regime’s repression of Christians ‘shocks the conscience’”, Fox News IRAN, 25 June 2019, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/iranian-regimes-repression-of-christians-shocks-the-conscience>

3. In their most recent World Watch List report<sup>32</sup> Open Doors repeats that leaders of Christian convert groups have been arrested, prosecuted and given long prison sentences for “crimes against the national security.” Secret house churches are monitored and frequently raided, and dozens of Christians are imprisoned in appalling conditions.
4. The international organisation Release which monitors persecution against Christians and arranges support as possible has identified Iran as country of growing concern in 2020. Release’s Iranian partner describes a ‘forced exodus’ of Christians as the government acts to ‘exterminate the Persian-speaking church’. Release’s partner reports persecution has been increasing in Iran for the past four years. The partner, who cannot be named for his own protection, describes a ‘forced exodus of the Christian community’. He adds: ‘Hundreds are fleeing in desperation. If they stay their lives will be in danger.’ The regime is taking steps to eradicate Christianity, he says. ‘Their overall goal is to eliminate the Persian-speaking church and only allow Christian minority groups to operate. . . . ‘If a Muslim is baptised as a Christian he or she can end up in prison for a year, while the person who performs the baptism can be jailed for four to five years’.
5. In December 2019 Dr. Majid Rafizadeh, president of the International American Council on the Middle East, raised the alarm about the worsening plight of Christians in Iran<sup>33</sup>. He indicated that the Islamic Republic of Iran is unleashing a sweeping crackdown on Christians, particularly those who have dared to convert from Islam to Christianity. “Across Iran, Christians are being arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges, such as ‘promoting Zionism’, ‘spreading corrupt Christian beliefs’, ‘propagating against the Islamic Republic in favor of Christianity’, ‘orientation toward the land of Christianity’, or ‘endangering national security’ ”. Dr Rafizadeh says that even though the international community labels the government of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani as a moderate administration, and even though Rouhani claims that the Islamic Republic treats all religions justly and fairly, Iran is one of the worst places in the world for Christians. He also names three Revolutionary Court judges, who systematically convict Christians on trumped up charges and joins the call for them to face international sanctions.

This is just a small sample of the information available. Even the recent (February 2020) publication of the British Home Office *“Country Policy and Information Note, Iran: Christians and Christian converts”*<sup>34</sup> notes “. . . .the Upper Tribunal (UT) did not find it safe to assume that ordinary Christians, that is to say individuals with no role beyond attending collective worship at house churches, escape the attention of the authorities.” This is a shift in the UK position, no doubt demanded by the rapidly changing situation.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/iran/>

<sup>33</sup> “In Iran, It Is a Crime to Be a Christian”, Gatestone Institute, 29 December 2019, <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/15229/iran-christians-persecution>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1253351/download>