

# The Plight of Iranian Christians

## Claiming International Protection in

# Türkiye

A Joint Report

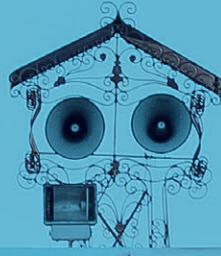
# 2023



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## Foreword

**In Iran**, the suppression of Christianity and harassment of converts from Islam to Christianity are part of an enduring, widespread, systematic, and well-documented campaign that may fulfil the criteria for persecution as defined in the Rome Statute<sup>1</sup>.

The government relentlessly and repeatedly targets Christians, and especially converts from Islam - who are seen as “apostates” - through harassment and mistreatment, forcing many to flee their homeland. Türkiye<sup>2</sup> has been the primary destination for most victims, and although the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) does not specify the number of Christians among the more than 15,000 Iranian claimants for international protection currently registered in Türkiye, they are believed to comprise a significant portion.

Iranian victims of religion-related repression are able to claim international protection in Türkiye and register as [asylum-seekers](#). After their claims are processed and they are acknowledged to be [refugees](#)<sup>3</sup>, they are granted international protection and await resettlement opportunities to a third country<sup>4</sup>. However, not all claims are



accepted, and, even if they are, resettlement can take many years. Meanwhile, most Iranian Christian refugees exist in survival mode, overwhelmed by their precarious living conditions. These refugees do not have stable jobs or incomes, and are at risk of being deported if the Turkish authorities choose to cancel their residency permits.

This report harnesses the joint expertise of the four contributing organisations, and first-hand testimonies of dozens of Iranian Christian refugees and asylum-seekers in Türkiye, to provide answers to the following key questions: What drives Christians to flee Iran? Why is Türkiye a preferred first destination? What is the procedure for those seeking international protection in Türkiye? What challenges do Iranian Christian refugees, and their children, face? Do they suffer discrimination? And what are the opportunities for resettlement in a third country?

<sup>1</sup> The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines “persecution” as “the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the [political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender identity] of the group or collectivity”. It is a crime against humanity when committed “as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population”. (Arts 7:1 (h) and 7:2 (g))

<sup>2</sup> The United Nations officially recognised the name change from “Turkey” in June 2022.

<sup>3</sup> “Refugees are people who have been forced to leave their homes and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country.”

<sup>4</sup> Although party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Türkiye retains geographical limitations when granting international protection to refugees, and those arising from non-European countries must look for resettlement to a third country. See <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey>

## What drives Christians to flee Iran?

*Christians flee Iran for various reasons, and each has a unique experience to relate. However, the common root cause is a well-founded fear of further targeting, harassment and mistreatment should they remain in Iran.*

In Iran, Christians from the officially recognised ethnic Armenian and Assyrian Christian communities are able to congregate and worship in their own languages. However, Persian-speaking Christians<sup>5</sup> are not recognised by the state and are considered to undermine the Islamic nature of the Iranian Republic. Consequently, these Christians can only meet secretly in so-called “house-churches,” and are vulnerable to arrest and prosecution on vague “national security” or “propaganda” charges, which can result in custodial sentences of up to [10 years](#).



Persian-speaking Christians are subject to government monitoring and persistent harassment, including regular summonses for interrogation, and pressure from government agents on employers to terminate their contracts. House-churches, when discovered, are routinely raided by agents of Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence or Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and church members are arrested, detained, and interrogated for long periods - in some cases several weeks. A detainee may be held in solitary confinement and

is often blindfolded while interrogated. Psychological torture is commonplace and physical abuse is also often reported. Generally, pressure is put on converts to revert to Islam or sign commitments to refrain from meeting with other converts. Christians who have been arrested and interrogated are likely to be indicted, then released conditionally if they are able to raise bail, pending a court hearing. Many Christians forfeit bail and flee the country, anticipating severe sentences.

Interrogators typically threaten Christians with several different punishments for their supposed crimes, including, in the case of converts from Islamic backgrounds, execution for apostasy - leaving Islam for another religion. Although the act of apostasy is punishable by death under Sharia (Islamic law), the Islamic Republic has never codified it, and the government usually charges converts to Christianity with security-related crimes, and rarely sentences them to death. Even so, the threat of execution can be very convincing and result in converts fleeing the country.

Some Christians flee after facing years of monitoring, harassment, restrictions on education and employment, and the resulting societal isolation. Others were already abroad when informed by relatives that security agents were searching for them, and were advised not to return.

<sup>5</sup> In this report, the term “Persian-speaking Christians” is used to denote either converts from Islam, or Armenian or Assyrian Christians ministering to converts, as opposed to regular members of the recognised Armenian and Assyrian Christian minorities in Iran.



I fled to Türkiye because I was being monitored, threatened, deprived of education in Iran, and because they sealed my workplace and didn't allow me to have a job."

— Mojtaba Golmohammadi



The Iranian government put pressure on me and my family because of our Christian faith, and some of our house-church members were arrested and we fled to Türkiye for fear of being arrested."

— Amin Salmani

## Why is Türkiye a preferred first destination for Iranians fleeing persecution?

*Türkiye is an easily accessed country for Iranians that offers them immediate safety and refuge - albeit only temporary - as well as an increased right to freedom of religion or belief.*



Iranian citizens do not require a visa to enter Türkiye, and it is possible to travel there by air or overland. Travelling to and staying in Türkiye is also relatively inexpensive. Many Iranian Christians previously visited Türkiye as tourists, or to attend conferences or training events, and are familiar with the country and culture, which is similar to that of Iran, while most major Turkish cities have one or more churches for Persian-speaking Christians.

It is also possible for those without travel documents to access Türkiye illegally over the mountains using the services of smugglers. This is very risky, due to the dangers posed by the smugglers themselves, and the possibility of encountering border guards; however, many converts have taken this route, deciding the dangers they were facing at home outweighed the risks of the journey.



**We entered Türkiye illegally and spent 18 hours in a truck to get there!”**

— Anonymous

*“At any moment, Iranian or Turkish police could have opened the truck door and caught us, so it was a very stressful experience. After arriving in Türkiye, we felt lost and exhausted. We felt insecure for a long time due to the difficult conditions we had gone through.”*

## What is the procedure for those seeking international protection in Türkiye?

*The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as*

***“someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion”.***

Anyone fleeing their country due to a well-founded fear for their security can request international protection in the country to which they flee. Although Türkiye is party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, it maintains a geographical limitation to the convention for people “fleeing events occurring in Europe”, while only providing temporary refuge to non-Europeans **until they are accepted** by third countries for resettlement.

Prior to 2018, the UNHCR registered and processed refugees in Türkiye; however, in 2018 registration and refugee status determination (RSD) was transferred to the Presidency of Migration Management, which comes under the authority of the Turkish Interior Ministry.

Since 2018 anyone claiming refugee status in Türkiye must register with the Provincial Directorates of Migration Management. Numbers of refugees from a particular nationality are restricted according to the province. This means that an Iranian refugee

may experience difficulties registering in a particular province if the allocation for Iranians has been reached.

After registration, the refugee receives an identity card that they must carry at all times. Everyone in Türkiye is required to carry a legally recognised form of identification (ID). However, for refugees, there are additional pressures. Turkish police carry out random checks on IDs, especially at transport hubs. Any refugee found without their ID can be arrested and sent to a detention centre to be deported.

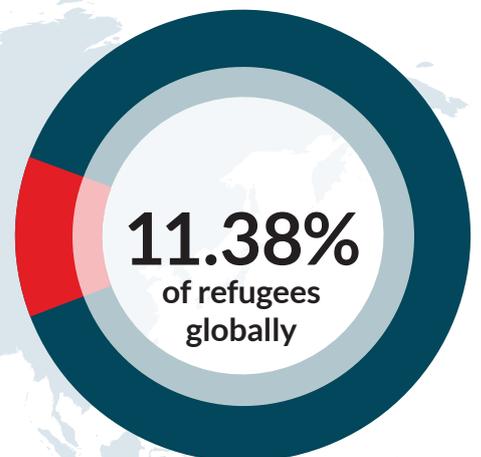
If a claimant receives a rejection notice from the Turkish Presidency of Migration Management following an RSD interview, the failed claimant must either appeal the denial in the courts – an expensive process that most refugees are unable to afford – or leave Türkiye within 10 days. There are very few countries that those with rejected refugee claims can proceed to, and many lack a valid passport for legal travel.



If the claimant is accepted following the RSD interview, they will be granted refugee status and afforded international protection, but this does not guarantee them immediate resettlement in a third country. Most refugees wait at least two years before being accepted onto the UN-run resettlement programme, but presently resettlement can take several more years, as the number of refugees needing resettlement far outstrips available locations and quotas.

According to UNHCR statistics, in mid-2022 there were 32.5 million refugees worldwide, **3.7 million** of whom were hosted by Türkiye. In the first six months of 2022, just 42,300 refugees were resettled globally, with or without the assistance of the UNHCR. If resettlement continues at this rate, it will take nearly 400 years to resettle the existing refugees throughout the world.

**3.7 M**   
REFUGEES  
in **Türkiye**



## What challenges do Iranian Christian refugees face in Türkiye?

All the claimants for international protection interviewed for this report, or those who work with them, discussed the multi-layered pressures, challenges and restrictions these refugees experience, including living with deep and constant fear.

Turkish landlords are often hesitant to rent accommodation to refugees, and sometimes demand higher deposits than normal. There is freedom of movement only within the province in which refugees are registered – travel outside requires special police permission – and violation of the travel regulations can result in the forfeiture of international protection, and possible deportation.

Since the Turkish authorities took over the processing of refugee claims from the UNHCR, the situation of Iranian Christian

refugees has lacked clarity: they do not enjoy the full protection of the UNHCR, rendering them vulnerable to intimidation and exploitation by police, by employers and by wider society.

Most Iranian Christian refugees in Türkiye are living in survival mode, overwhelmed by concerns about their precarious living conditions, with no stable jobs or income, and at risk of deportation if the Turkish authorities choose to cancel their residency permits.

*In the section below, we unpack the primary challenges refugees face, and hear first-hand testimonies of many of the refugees themselves.*



## 1. Lack of employment, exploitation, and financial challenges

According to the Turkish Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance (Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı), asylum-seekers are **eligible** to obtain a work permit six months after registration, and those with refugee status do not require any special permit to work. However, refugees are a cheap source of labour, and employers are often unwilling to register them legally and be obliged to pay additional costs for social insurance, etc. Refugee workers are thus left with little option but to take on illegal work, most commonly as factory workers or on construction sites. This informal and illegal arrangement leaves them vulnerable to exploitation: their employment can be terminated without notice, wages withheld, and their employers are not liable for work-related injuries.





**We don't have a fixed job, so any employer can easily sack us"**

— Mohsen (Mani) Aliabady Ravari



**"The working hours in this country are very long. The salaries are very low, and sometimes they don't even pay us and our work is wasted, and we can't complain to anyone"**, Mohsen (Mani) Aliabady Ravari, who has been in Türkiye since March 2016, [informed](#) Article18.



Another refugee who was recently resettled in Canada, Maryam Bateni Nia, put it this way when [interviewed](#) by Article18 in Türkiye in 2019: **"We are torn between abiding by the law or meeting our basic needs. In other countries, refugees have support systems. They receive housing or work opportunities, but here we're denied those, and we're sent to cities where we can't meet the basic standards of living. [My husband] Reza [Mousavi] is most of the time at work and has to really work hard for us to live here."**

Reza added: **"In small cities, any jobs that you may be able to find are very hard labour, and then you'll be lucky if you will be paid for the work that you do. I have a slipped disk and I can't do heavy physical labour. That's personal for me, but maybe others are in a similar situation."**



On 1 January 2023, new [legislation](#) came into force to penalise foreigners working without the necessary permits - and their employers. It has subsequently become even harder for refugees to find work to support themselves and their families.



**If there is work available, Turkish people are put first"**

— Anonymous



CSW interviewed several Iranian Christian families in 2022 who asked to remain anonymous. All expressed desperation and frustration at their difficult circumstances, which included exploitation at workplaces, and bullying at schools. Several said they had to hide their faith in order to keep their jobs. Many Christian converts reported that their employer fired them when their faith became known. Others also informed CSW about their struggles to provide food and medical treatment for their families. Many of them worked 16 hours per day for half of what Turkish employees received.

*At the same time,  
opportunities for social or financial support  
for refugees remain very limited.*

In the words of [Iman Ghaznavian Haghghi](#), who was recently resettled in Canada after many years: **“The Turkish government, they give you an ID card, but it’s just a piece of paper, and you are even shy to show it to anybody. You cannot even rent an apartment; you cannot do anything – no bank account, nothing. You have a paper to just stay here and wait to go to the third country that is accepting refugees and can accept you as a citizen. You don’t have any identity; no work; you need to work, but you can only work illegally, and I don’t know how it looks for a Christian to work illegally. It’s not about people looking for a better life. We want to have just basic things. If they accepted us as citizens, for sure we would stay here and we would be happy, because it is a culture near to ours.”**



Reza Mousavi added: **“For us who fled persecution, we fled without organising a plan. We didn’t have savings to take with us, that we could carry on spending for a couple of years. We didn’t have any plan for learning the language, or work, or anything like that. So when we got here, we found ourselves in the middle of all this refugee process. The Turkish government, UN, ASAM [Association for Solidarity with Asylum-seekers and Migrants], any of these authorities do not financially help in any way at all. I had to actually sign in my first interview a document saying that I do not have any claim on receiving help or support. They don’t offer you any accommodation, or somewhere to sleep. Even when you want to rent a house, it will be more expensive for you than a Turkish resident. So this all shows the basic financial needs asylum-seekers have.”**



## 2. Health insurance withdrawal

A lack of job opportunities and finances has a knock-on effect on the general health and wellbeing of refugees, as illustrated by the experiences of Alireza (Parham) Mohammadpour, who has been in Türkiye since 2016. **“I was 95 kilos when I arrived in Türkiye,”** he **told** Article18. **“Due to financial problems, many days I just bought cheap bread. Some days I fasted to better endure hunger. I lost 35 kilos in one month, and this rapid weight loss caused a lot of damage to my skin, and I got a skin disease. I applied to the Turkish Organisation for the Disabled. One of my friends, who is paralysed and uses a wheelchair, receives 1,000 liras [\$145] a month. But because I don’t use a wheelchair I was told, ‘You aren’t paralysed and no amount will be allocated for your disability.’ I went to cafes and restaurants to find work and asked employers to hire me even to wash toilets, but**

**they rejected my request and said, ‘You are disabled, so we can’t hire you.’ I once went to a Turkish financial institution for financial support. The person in charge of that section, when he saw the cross around my neck, asked me: ‘Are you a Christian?’ I said: ‘Yes.’ He said: ‘We don’t help hungry Christians. Even if we had a budget, we’d help a hungry Muslim.’ On the way home, I cried a lot and told God, ‘The disability organisation wasn’t helping me because it claimed I wasn’t disabled, but restaurants don’t hire me because they say that I’m disabled; what should I do? Then I started to make and sell pickled vegetables so I could pay the rent.’”**



The situation was exacerbated in 2020, when the Turkish government **restricted** its health-insurance provision to one year following registration, compelling refugees to resort to private healthcare if they have the resources, or to forgo healthcare altogether.

One refugee, who is a convert to Christianity who did not wish to be named, told Article18 at the time: **“Since my condition is very acute, we were forced to go to a private hospital.”** But when she asked how much the procedure would cost, the answer astounded her: **“The first time, I was told 5,500 liras [approximately \$800], but then I was told, ‘Because of the scans and so on, the price is actually 17,000 liras [\$2,500].’ I said, ‘It can’t be! Is that even possible?’”** This lady was eventually able to negotiate for the price to be reduced to 7,500 liras (around \$1,100); however, it was still far more than she could afford.

In March 2020, a 35-year-old Iranian refugee named Massoud **died** after the Turkish authorities withdrew his insurance provision and he was no longer able to afford his medical expenses. An Iranian church leader who knew Massoud told Article18 afterwards: **“He couldn’t afford his medical expenses, so he applied to the migration authorities, but they refused to re-activate his insurance. Refugees are in a very bad situation and they are very worried. Since the insurance was cut off, we have had many requests for help, but, unfortunately, due to limited funding, we cannot help everyone.”**



### 3. Discrimination, racism, societal hostility and security threats

A strong Turkish nationalist Islamist movement has **arisen**, capable of extremely violent actions against those seen as apostates and enemies of the state. Meanwhile, the initial warm reception granted to Syrian refugees and others, including those from Iran seeking international protection, is being replaced by a growing hostility.

One refugee, Mahmoudreza Deylami, told MEC: **“I’ve seen many racist behaviours by Turks and the Turkish government, and I was threatened by the immigration office agents with being deported to Iran after they rejected my case.”**



Another, Milad Iqani, said it had become **“unbearable”** to stay in Türkiye, **“due to racial discrimination [by] Turks”**, as well as **“the lack of rights, and the instability of my refugee status after seven years without being interviewed”**.



Concerns have also been **raised** about the recent vilification of Christians, and how they could become the target of extremists.

Iranian refugee families interviewed by CSW highlighted that societal hostility towards Christians varies from one city to another. According to one local source: **“Iranian refugees prefer Antalya to other cities in Türkiye because it is beautiful, people are more tolerant, and local authorities are not as strict as in other cities.”**

Increasing hostility against Christians, including Iranian refugees, is likely to make it even harder for them to find employment or affordable accommodation, etc., and this is exacerbated by the severe economic problems in Türkiye, and recent earthquakes, which have further increased competition for housing and resources.

Meanwhile, **news reports** indicate that Iranian intelligence operates in Türkiye, posing a threat to the refugees and their connections in Iran.

**“Agents of the Islamic Republic are active in Türkiye as it is adjacent to Iran,”** one refugee explained to MEC on condition of anonymity. **“I was tracked three times at least.”**

#### 4. Children's welfare and education

*The children of refugees have access to state education, but language issues and reported discrimination - on both ethnic and religious grounds - have meant that many children of Iranian Christians have been left without opportunities for education.*



**"Despite getting excellent grades at school, our children are not permitted to participate in academic and sports competitions with their Turkish classmates,"** Amir Hooshang Khashijan, whose application for refugee status was rejected in 2020, told MEC.

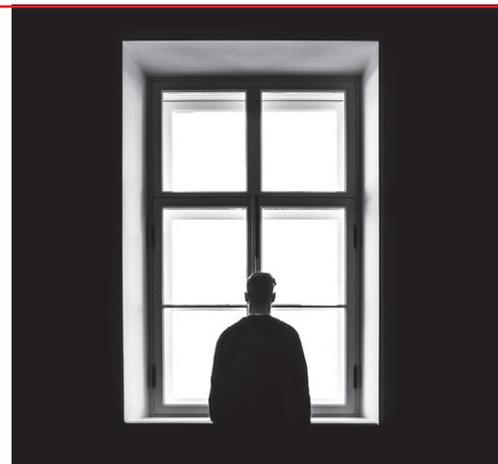
**"Everybody at school knows that my eldest daughter is a Christian,"** Mani Aliabady Ravari's wife, Manizheh (Marjan) Bagheri, [told Article18](#). **"The teacher deliberately denigrates Christianity. For example, the teacher says that Christians worship three Gods. All the kids look at my daughter with disdain. 'I have to put my head down,' my daughter says. Her teacher and her classmates treat my daughter very badly and devastatingly."**

**"I wish at least there was a support system for families,"** Maryam Bateni Nia said. **"Especially those with children. You know, we and a lot of those who come fleeing persecution in Iran had their own lives and livelihoods - they may have been doing well, meeting their own needs back in their own home country. Now they have come here, and in addition to enduring all that hardship, they feel responsible for what has happened to their children. So somebody like our child comes here, and now he is at the age that he understands why we are here and what circumstances led to our escape from Iran, and he questions, 'What would happen if we weren't arrested? Would we be in a similar situation, or not?' So I'm not expecting any sort of financial help, but at least something to facilitate a support for these families so that this period of waiting would be shortened for them, or at least somebody to hear them out and understand what they are going through."**



## 5. Uncertainty and procedural inconsistencies

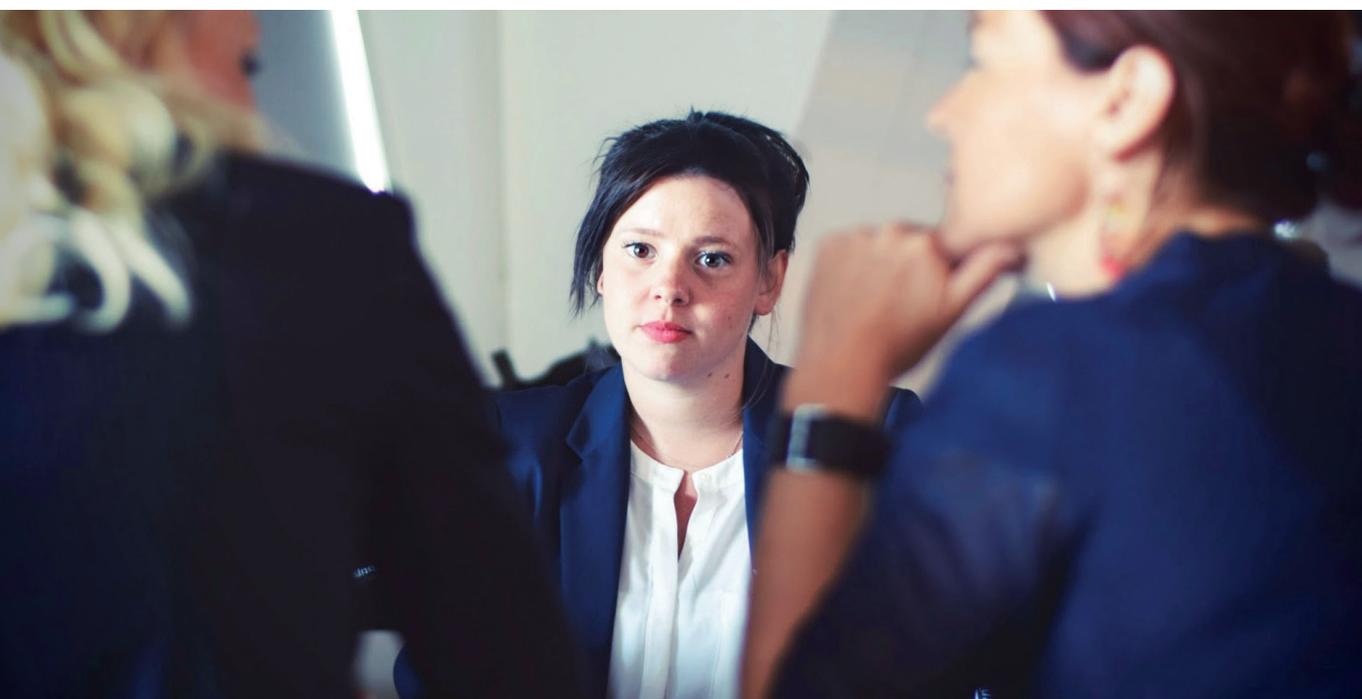
*The refugee waits – often for many years – to be summoned for an RSD interview, which can last several hours. The aim of the interview is to assess the claims of the refugee and establish if there were genuine reasons for them to leave their country of origin, and whether they have “a well-founded fear of persecution”<sup>6</sup> on religious grounds should they be returned.*



A translator is present during the RSD interview, as well as an interviewer, but several interviewees have criticised the procedure, claiming that their Turkish interviewer lacked understanding about evangelical Christianity and the oppression experienced by adherents in Iran. Some also said their faith and conversion were ridiculed. This raises the question of whether a religiously inclined Muslim interviewer can objectively assess the refugee claim of someone they regard as an apostate.

Reza Mousavi explained what happened during his interview: **“It was right at the time when they were blocking entry for new refugees to Europe and the US. And from what others who have gone before or after us have said – about how they were treated – it was completely different from our experience. The interviewer is a Muslim and not necessarily sympathetic to our situation. Their main question is, ‘Why did you convert from Islam to Christianity?’ And I have to explain this. And another question is, ‘What was wrong with Islam that you converted?’, which puts us in a really difficult situation. We have to talk negatively about the faith that we held, and which this guy is a believer in. We know that there are people around us who have asylum cases based on false claims.**

<sup>6</sup> The fear of repeated persecution based on the fact that an applicant has already been subject to persecution or serious harm, or direct threats of such persecution or such harm – in this instance on the grounds of religion or belief – and that there are legitimate grounds to believe this is likely to be repeated.



So I can understand that they would see me as somebody similar to them. But what I would expect, and I think is reasonable, is that they would have an expert eye to look at these cases, to discern the genuine cases of persecution of Christians. What I can't understand is that a few people would end up being accepted, and others would be refused, all with similar circumstances."

Meanwhile, many refugees live in what one Iranian Christian, Kavian Fallah-Mohammadi, described as a state of **"complete uncertainty"**.

"I registered as an asylum-seeker at the United Nations, but after four years not only was I not interviewed, but I am still in an unstable situation in Türkiye, and still the situation really isn't clear!" Kavian explained. "So I have no clear vision for the future, and I don't trust the Turkish government to protect me, as almost all the valid Christian cases are being rejected, and I am living in fear of deportation."



I live in uncertainty in Türkiye as they don't give me any rights as a refugee, and they still haven't interviewed me after seven years."

— Shadi Noveiri Gilani

"For us, the timing itself is not an issue," explained Reza Mousavi. "We've been here for too long, but at least if we knew the direction we were heading in, then we could manage the time."

## 6. Threat of deportation

*Since 2018, when the Turkish authorities began processing refugee claims instead of the UNHCR, it is noticeable that many Iranian Christians with credible claims for international protection have been rejected.*

In January 2023, Article18 [reported](#) the case of an Iranian-Assyrian pastor, Ninous Italiaee, whose refugee status was recognised by the UNHCR but subsequently overturned by the Turkish authorities. He and his wife were held in a detention centre for three months, and their appeal against deportation was then rejected. At the time of writing, they could be repatriated at any moment.

Another claimant for international protection, Amir Hooshang Khashijan, explained: **“We had only a few days to leave Iran and had no time to plan. As a result, we couldn’t get together the documents the interviewers wanted, to [prove] that we were in danger in Iran.”**

The refugee claim of Anglican church leader Hekmat Salimi and his family was rejected in December 2020, and while their appeal was initially successful, a further appeal by the Turkish immigration authorities [backed](#) the RSD’s initial denial. Two reasons were given: firstly, that the reverend and his family were not considered to be at risk of persecution if they returned to Iran, and secondly that Rev Hekmat had failed to correctly remember the precise date of his arrest at the Imam Khomeini International Airport in Tehran. In February 2022, the reverend, his wife and daughter were served a deportation notice, giving them seven days to leave Türkiye or be forcibly deported.

Esmail Falahati and his family had been in Türkiye for five years when they were suddenly summoned by the Turkish immigration authorities in January 2021, arrested, and informed they would be deported. The family was taken to a detention centre, before experiencing what Esmail called a “miraculous” escape. However, as he [told](#) WORLD: **“There are many refugees in Türkiye who face a similar situation. A lot of refugees have called to say, ‘We are all afraid. If they are treating you this way, then how might they treat us?’”**





In December 2019, Bijan Farokhpour Haghighi was told he was to be deported because of an alleged failure to sign in at his local police station for three consecutive months. He **told** Article18: **“In 2014, I had to send my wife and paraplegic child to Türkiye to seek asylum. In my absence, they suffered a lot. If I am deported now, what will be their fate now? We have many problems in Türkiye. Our asylum insurance has been terminated and we do not have a work permit. Wherever they find out that we are Christians, they treat us badly. On the other hand, we are under pressure from the Islamic Republic not to return.”**



Maryam Bateni Nia and Reza Mousavi were also served with a deportation order. **“We were so frightened,”** Maryam explained. **“It was two days after this [deportation] order that we were called by the UN staff. And usually when they call, they have an interpreter, but that day a Turkish woman called, spoke to my husband, and said, ‘Tomorrow, 8 o’clock, you need to be here at the UN office.’ She was very serious, and we were frightened to death. We thought, ‘This is for our deportation. The police have informed them and now they have summoned us to deport us.’”**

Esmail Falahati said he felt the UNHCR **“has no concern for our case”**, adding: **“I want to come out of this dark tunnel and go somewhere safe. Türkiye is not safe for me. Those who are ministers of the Lord here are not wanted.”**



## 7. Psychological pressure

*The threat of deportation aggravates the trauma already felt by refugees.*



In Türkiye, I experienced a lot of trauma and didn't have any support, so the immigration pain added to previous pains, and was a continuance of all I faced, and the suffering I had"

— Mojtaba Hosseini



Kavian Fallah-Mohammadi said that the trauma he already felt from having to leave Iran was exacerbated when his visa application for Australia was rejected. **"That was a big shock for me,"** he said. **"I really didn't expect that such a heavy [prison] sentence [of 10 years] would be handed down to me, and then that a country that accepts asylum-seekers would reject my case, and that this very severe psychological pressure would be placed on me."**

**"We are not here out of choice,"** Mani Aliabady Ravari explained. **"We are far from our family and country. During our first days in Türkiye, it was like we were deaf and dumb; we didn't even know one word of Turkish."**

Parham Mohammadpour put it this way: **"In Türkiye, I have been through many difficult things and problems, and experienced a lot of loneliness. During this time, I haven't seen my family once."**

Another refugee, who did not wish to be identified, told Article18: **"In all the years we endured prison cells in Iran, and later hardships of living in Türkiye as a refugee, I never thought that one day I would consider taking my own life, but I just don't see it in me to handle much more."**



## What are the opportunities for resettlement to a third country?

*Traditionally, many refugees in Türkiye have been resettled through the UN mechanism; however, the process has slowed significantly in the past few years. In contrast to the situation a few years ago, only a small percentage of those relocated are Iranians, and an even smaller percentage are Iranian Christians.*

The United States used to receive many refugees, until a tougher stance on immigration, including the Trump travel ban of 2017, restricted arrivals from predominantly Muslim countries such as Iran. A joint [report](#) by World Relief and Open Doors highlighted the dramatic reduction in refugee arrivals in the US between 2015 and 2020 from countries where Christians are most victimised. Of all the countries listed, Iran saw the sharpest decline, with a 97% drop in refugee arrivals since 2015.

The extraordinary reduction in the number of refugees accepted by the United States has left few clear prospects for the resettlement of Iranian Christians fleeing persecution. One of the remaining options

is to be accepted through a **“private sponsorship”** programme to countries like Canada and Australia. However, those working to sponsor refugees have faced challenges, including identifying sponsors, long processing times, limited sponsorship places per year, and raising funds.

There is a critical need for new resettlement opportunities and sponsorship programmes to address this issue. We applaud the recent [announcement](#) by the US Department of State of a private sponsorship programme for the resettlement of refugees. This could be a major contribution, providing an additional alternative to the existing sponsorship programmes of Australia and Canada.

## Countries with sponsorship programmes



### Canada

Canadian citizens and permanent residents can engage in the resettlement of refugees through the “**Private Sponsorship of Refugees**” (PSR) programme - a pioneering refugee-resettlement initiative.



### Australia

The **Community Support Programme** (CSP), a private-sponsorship initiative of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection of Australia, commenced on 1 July 2017. The programme permits individuals, community groups, and businesses to sponsor eligible refugees to resettle in Australia. There is a limit of 1,000 sponsorship places per year.



### USA

The US has now launched a private refugee sponsorship programme that is closely modelled on Canada’s refugee-resettlement programme. The programme, called the “**Welcome Corps**”, was announced by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in January 2023, and details are to be announced later in 2023.

## Special refugee programmes

In response to crises, special provisions have been made to facilitate the resettlement of refugees. For example, in February 2023 the Canadian parliament unanimously passed a motion to start a refugee programme to **resettle 10,000 Uyghurs** fleeing persecution in China. We welcome such initiatives to assist targeted ethno-religious communities such as the Uyghurs, and appeal for the establishment of a similar initiative to expedite the resettlement of refugees from Türkiye, including Iranian Christians.





## Recommendations

*We commend the government and people of Türkiye for providing a refuge for Iranian Christians and others with a well-founded fear of persecution - for the last eight years Türkiye has hosted **more refugees** than any other country. We also thank the Turkish authorities for upholding the right of Iranian Christians and others to gather together for worship.*

Nevertheless, we call on:

- Türkiye to provide access to basic healthcare beyond the first year of registration for protection, and to regulate and facilitate employment opportunities for refugees, thereby ending exploitation in the workplace;
- The Turkish immigration authorities to clarify the application procedure, providing a timeline within which claims will be processed, and to undertake and illustrate due diligence in assessing refugee claims, including those of Iranian Christians;
- The UNHCR to ensure the resettlement process is transparent, and to intervene swiftly to assist refugees and asylum-seekers who are in imminent danger of refoulement;
- Refugee-receiving governments to provide resettlement opportunities and develop sponsorship programmes to expedite the resettlement process for Iranian Christians and other refugees in Türkiye.



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