



THREATENED BY DEPORTATION

Disregard of the human dignity of refugees in Germany

Representative survey on the asylum status of
5,207 Christian converts



OpenDoors

Im Dienst der verfolgten **Christen** weltweit

Publisher

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Editorial

Is the human dignity of Christian converts in question?

"Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority." With this important article of its Constitution, the Federal Republic of Germany commits itself to particularly respect and protect the individual human rights of each individual.

This principle also applies to the refugees Germany received, especially at the height of the so-called "refugee crisis" in 2015 and 2016, to protect them from war and persecution.

Human dignity includes the right to choose one's faith, which is protected by the right to freedom of religion. In the Muslim countries of origin, from whence many of the refugees stem, little attention is paid to this right. While the general population is also affected by lack of religious freedom, adherents of non-Muslim religions such as Christians are most negatively impacted. In countries such as Syria, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, conversion to the Christian faith or another religion is treated as apostasy, a crime worthy of death according to Islamic jurisprudence.

The countries of origin of most refugees rank near the top on the World Watch List published annually by Open Doors, where Christians are exposed to a very high to extreme degree of persecution. For most refugees, the desire for peace also includes the ability to freely choose and live their faith without fear of reprisal by the state, extremists or even their relatives.

Tens of thousands of refugees have accepted the Christian faith in Germany. They were baptized here and participate in the life of the church communities. Therefore it is of great concern to us, that the asylum procedures of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) as well as the administrative courts, give little heed to the leaders of these congregations and their assessment of the refugees' faith. Open Doors made this observation already in the October 2019 survey and asked for improvements. Compounding the issue, the administrative courts are often guided

by the decisions of the BAMF, causing even the most vulnerable Christian converts to receive asylum less frequently than in the first years of the refugee crisis. In several cases, refugee converts have been deported to countries such as Afghanistan or Iran.

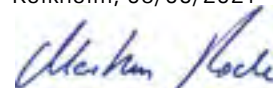
An overhaul of the asylum procedures on the basis of Article 1 of the Constitution would lead to equal protection of the right to religious freedom for all people in our country. Rejection letters that disregard the free expression of a convert's faith and the affidavits of the clergy caring for them, deprive refugees of their human dignity.

Certainly, there are outliers who merely feign conversion for tactical purposes. However, these individual cases must not be used to cast doubt on all refugees and assume ulterior motives behind their conversion. Especially Iranian asylum seekers are often confronted with this suspicion. In fact, however, especially in Iran there has been a high number of conversions for years despite severe persecution.

The representative survey about asylum procedures and administrative decisions presented here is the second of its kind. It should serve as a basis for reevaluation of current practices. I very much hope that this report will improve the situation of Christian converts in Germany, many of whom are traumatized enough. It is crucial to strengthen the obvious lack of trust that politicians have in the clergy of all churches and in Christian converts.

In a time of an increased persecution of Christians worldwide, a reckoning is needed for politicians, judges and the BAMF decision-makers to take seriously their responsibility to protect human dignity – especially of those who are persecuted because of their faith. May this survey make an important contribution to this end.

Kelkheim, 08/06/2021



Markus Rode
CEO Open Doors Germany

1. Executive Summary

- A) The empirical data collected refer to the investigation period of 2017-May 2021. Data from before 2017 (refugee crisis 2015/16) was not considered.
- B) The census of data took place between June 9th and July 6th, 2021. A relatively short data-collection period enabled a quick response to the current situation.
- C) 133 Lutheran (largely state) and Evangelical (free church) congregations from all federal states as well as two local Evangelical Alliances participated in the survey.
- D) In total, information was provided on 5,207 converts. They are mostly from Iran (3,081), Syria (855), Afghanistan (754), Iraq (206), Pakistan, Eritrea, and Nigeria.
- E) Certificates from churches (affidavits of faith) are only considered to a small extent: The 113 parishes reported that in 2017–May 2021, of the 5,207 converts they served, 2,045 were rejected by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and 1,400 were rejected by administrative courts (AC) despite the submission of clerical affidavits concerning the authenticity of their faith; 99 converts were deported.
- F) A uniform objective standard of review in the processing of asylum applications from converts seeking protection does not seem to be guaranteed. A comparison on state level of the administrative decisions issued, revealed statistically significant discrepancies in the ratio of recognition to rejection rates of converts by the BAMF and AC. This suggests a high level of subjectivity in the asylum process.
- G) A further source of discrepancy is the convert's country of origin. Virtually all Syrians received a protection status (at least a ban on deportation), but almost no converts from Nigeria and Afghanistan did. 82 % of Iranian converts received at least one rejection during the investigation period.
- H) The BAMF grants protection status to fewer and fewer converts, as the example of Iran shows. In 2017, the BAMF denied protection status to 50.6 % of all refugees from Iran. In 2020, that share rose to 77.3 % and as of May was 76.2 % in 2021. At their hearing, well over 30 % of Iranian refugees described themselves as Christians; therefore, many must have been converts.
- I) The decline in BAMF protection rates and the increasing denial of protection status for converts since 2017, despite the threat of persecution, raises many questions and has shifted thousands of cases to the administrative courts.
- J) In many cases, rejection notices of the BAMF as well as AC judgments are based on old AC precedent and country reports of the Federal Foreign Office (2012, 2013, etc.), which no longer reflect the current situation for converts e.g. in Iran.
- K) When assessing whether the religious life of converts would result in persecution in the event of deportation, objective criteria such as the persecution situation in the country of origin are insufficiently considered.
- L) Thus, is the confession of Jesus Christ, the decisive characteristic of a Christian, but generally prohibited in the converts' countries of origin.
- M) The confession of Christ as identity-forming is only infrequently considered in asylum procedures. This is equivalent to a mistrust of clergy members who have been caring for converts for years.

2. Introduction

The non-denominational Christian relief organization Open Doors has been serving persecuted Christians for over 65 years and is currently active in near 60 countries. Open Doors publishes annually the World Watch List, a ranking of 50 countries where Christians are most persecuted and discriminated. These include countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Syria and Iraq from whence many refugees in Germany came. In such countries, the revelation of a conversion or the belonging to a church can trigger severe persecution – regardless of how intensively individuals live their faith. Christian converts are particularly at risk in these countries. Turning away from Islam is considered a disgrace and a crime worthy of death (apostacy). By fleeing to Germany, many converts seek to escape this persecution in their countries of origin. Other refugees became Christians in or on their way to Germany. They could not live their new faith freely in their countries of origin and require therefore protection.

Calls for help out of reception facilities because of violence against religious minorities

During the great wave of refugees to Germany in 2015/2016, many churches and individual Christians reached out to Open Doors for help. The cause were cries for help from Christian refugees, as well as members of other religious minorities. These were subjected to threats, oppression and violence by Muslim refugees and security guards in reception facilities because of their faith. At that time, religiously motivated attacks were not documented. Politicians, as well as the providers and managers of reception facilities, spoke of such incidences as outliers, and concluded that no further investigation or intervention was necessary. For this reason, Open Doors decided

to conduct a survey in the reception facilities to assess and document the extent of religiously motivated attacks. This study was to give policymakers a reliable basis for intervention on behalf of Christian refugees against religiously motivated attacks.

Lack of protection of minorities against religiously motivated attacks in Germany

In May 2016 and October 2016, Open Doors, in cooperation with other NGOs and the Central Council of Oriental Christians (ZOCD), published two studies documenting religiously motivated attacks on 743 Christian refugees ("Mangelnder Schutz religiöser Minderheiten in Deutschland"¹ see Chapter 13 "Appendixes"). Furthermore, Open Doors, in cooperation with the ZOCD, investigated recent attacks on Christian refugees in a facility in the State of Hesse where the situation was especially dramatic. Some Christians were faced with death threats. Former Muslims who had come to faith in Jesus Christ were particularly vulnerable; however, traditional Christians were also affected. The report of this investigation was also published in October 2016 ("Übergriffe auf christliche Flüchtlinge" / Dokumentation Rotenburg)². In response to Open Doors' reports, Hesse was the first federal state to implement necessary improvements to protect religious minorities in refugee centers.

Protection for Christian converts from deportation to countries with persecution

The support of many Christians in Germany for the incoming refugees resulted in Muslims from Iran, Syria and Afghanistan, among others, turning to the Christian faith. Initially, the authorities (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees [BAMF] as well as adminis-

1 Open Doors. Mangelnder Schutz religiöser Minderheiten in Deutschland.

On: https://www.opendoors.de/sites/default/files/2016_10_Erhebung_Mangelnder_Schutz_religioeser_Minderheiten_Auflage4_04_2017.pdf. Last accessed on: 08/06/2021.

2 Open Doors. Übergriffe auf christliche Flüchtlinge.

On: https://www.opendoors.de/sites/default/files/2017_Juli_Fluechtlingsbericht_Rotenburg_deutsch.PDF. Last accessed on: 08/06/2021.

trative courts) were commonly of the opinion that converts to the Christian faith ought not to be deported to their countries of origin (before July 1st, 2017, 67.9 % of the decisions were positive). It appears as though the fact that Christians were severely persecuted because of their faith was known, especially considering that converting to Christianity is a capital crime in many of the refugees' home countries. Often converts received asylum and were able to stay in Germany, but that soon changed. In time, despite their vulnerability, fewer and fewer converts received asylum protection. After numerous reports from churches, organizations, and the media about a significant increase of "arbitrary" rejections of converts by the BAMF, Open Doors began to investigate the asylum situation of Christian refugees.

On October 28th, 2019, Open Doors presented the study "Protecting Converts against Deportation to Countries where Christians are persecuted"³ (see Chapter 13 "Annexes"). Some converts had already turned to the Christian faith in their countries of origin, others during their flight or after their arrival in Germany. Numerous church congregations helped refugees of various kinds, through which many had their first contact with the Christian faith. Several asylum seekers had also fled to Germany specifically in the hope that they would be able to freely live out their Christian faith; something they were unable to do at home out of fear. For thousands of them, however, this dream has not been realized. Worse yet, many are ordered by German authorities to return to their countries of origin despite the waiting persecution.

Decreasing protection rates for converts – accusation of "change of faith for asylum tactical reasons".

In the 2019 survey, data from 179 parishes were processed and the situation of 6,516 converts was mapped. Among other trends, a significant decline in the protection for converts granted by the BAMF

since mid-2017 was noted. Many pastors and priests had previously made this observation. Only 37.6 % of converts were granted protection status by the BAMF in 2018–2019. For many of them, their change of faith was doubted. By contrast, the pastors interviewed found 88 % of converts to be credible, 86 % of which actively participating in church life beyond attending worship services. It was further found that protection rates vary widely from state to state.

The presentation of baptismal certificates as well as clerical affidavits on the active religious life of converts showed a statistically negative effect on the decisions by the BAMF, with the probability of a rejection increasing when an affidavit was presented. Converts were accused of changing their faith for tactical reasons; pastors being implicitly accused of bias.

The publication of the 2019 survey was associated with the expectation that the undesirable developments in asylum processes identified in the report would be corrected. Two years later, the recommendations for action and demands on politicians and authorities have largely gone unheeded. The situation for converts remains poor.

The current survey from 2021 represents about 8 % of the population of all refugee converts in Germany. For the period 2017–May 2021, it can therefore be estimated that several tens of thousands of converts were rejected by the BAMF or ACs.

Too little attention paid to the vulnerability of converts in their countries of origin

The BAMF protection rate for converts is very low. The unique danger for converts in their countries of origin is too often neglected in the BAMF decisions on asylum applications. In an interview with Deutsche Welle⁴, a pastor even spoke of a BAMF branch office in his region rejecting applications *"almost on principle"*. *"They do this with a superficiality that is shocking."* Other clergy members told Open Doors of similar experiences.

3 Open Doors. Protecting Converts against Deportation to Countries where Christians are persecuted. On: https://www.opendoors.de/sites/default/files/Open_Doors_2019_Protecting_Converts_against_Deportation_where_Christians_are_persecuted_certified.pdf. Last accessed on: 08/06/2021.

4 Deutsche Welle. Pfarrer Gottfried Martens: Kritik an der Asylpraxis. On: <https://www.dw.com/de/pfarrer-gottfried-martens-kritik-an-der-asylpraxis/a-57459208>. Last accessed on: 08/06/2021.

Current statement of the BAMF in an interview

The experiences of pastors and priests do not seem to come to the attention of those responsible at the BAMF, or they are simply ignored. In another interview of Deutsche Welle⁵ (chapter 10 "The topic in the media – examples") Ursula Gräfin Praschma, Vice-President of the BAMF, described the handling of asylum procedures for converts. Her words clearly contradict the experiences of pastors and priests.

She answered the question of how to proceed with converts, in whom the desire for change of faith matured before their flight, as follows: *"Of course there are refugees who already come to Germany with these thoughts, are cared for by Christians after the flight, thereby come into concrete contact with Christianity for the first time and feel spiritually at home. That is a good reason for granting protection. Let us be quite clear: If someone is baptized in Germany, then he (she) is a Christian, and we do not question his (her) being a Christian. That is our utmost derivative."*

According to these words, the faith or even the conversion of a baptized Christian is not questioned by the BAMF. This should also make clear that a Christian ought not be deported to a country with strong or extreme persecution of Christians, especially if they are of Muslim origin.

The BAMF Vice President continued: *"But of course we also try to clarify whether for this Christian the new faith takes place more meditatively in his inner being and he only goes to church on occasion, or whether he is strongly moved by his new faith, is involved in the church and is known there. That's also a decisive standard that has to be factored into the decision as well."*

Must then converts exhibit a life of faith that provokes persecution? Can the likelihood of such a life of faith be predicted? For most converts it is self-evident that they want to live their faith privately as well as publicly, even when faced with persecution.

"If someone is baptized in Germany, then he is a Christian"

To date, clergy of various state and free churches have baptized thousands of converts after careful baptismal instruction and examination. Many of them actively participate in church life, with many being committed workers in their congregations. Nevertheless, their application for asylum protection on the grounds of religious persecution has been rejected.

If, according to the BAMF, they are Christians, why then do they not receive asylum protection?

Strictly speaking, they are converted Christians from countries where turning away from Islam is a capital crime or in which extremist groups and so-called "fundamentalists" practice their own system of justice. If they are identified as converts they face persecution from the government and/or society.

Why do these Christians not receive asylum protection in Germany?

Gräfin Praschma *"also knows from decades of experience [...]": There are many different ways in which people live out their faith.* To which Deutsche Welle then inquired: *"You spoke of the BAMF recognizing the baptism of refugees as a matter of fact, and at the same time mentioned the possible examination of whether the change of faith had occurred for asylum-related reasons. So, in the end, the baptism will be questioned."*

The BAMF vice-president firmly rejected this: *"Absolutely not. It is about clarifying how the religious identity of the applicant is shaped. It is not about a faith exam or anything similar. We must clarify whether there is a threat of persecution if the person concerned would have to return to his home country. If, after weighing up all the arguments and facts, we have the impression that the applicant's life of faith would indeed lead to persecution there, then we grant protection. That's why it's always very helpful for us when we receive an affidavit from the church about what the life of faith in the church community actually looks like."*

5 Deutsche Welle. Praschma: "Es geht stets um den Einzelfall".

On: <https://www.dw.com/de/praschma-es-geht-stets-um-den-einzelfall/a-57718159>. Last accessed on: 08/06/2021.

Accordingly, based on the affidavit, which attests to the current faith life of converts, it is possible to predict whether and how converts would continue to live their faith in the future in the event of deportation in their country of origin. However, Open Doors' October 2019 survey found that more converts were rejected after presenting such a certificate than those without.

The clerical affidavits

Hundreds of pastors and priests have issued affidavits for converts whom they know personally to be given to the authorities. These same converts testify at their BAMF hearing that either persecution awaits them in their home country or that they have already experienced it, either personally or among their friends in the environment. Christian organizations and other NGOs that have been active in the converts' countries of origin for decades unanimously report that converts are highly vulnerable and endangered. This is also true, though often to a lesser extent, for traditional Christians.

Why then does the BAMF and the administrative courts fail to (!) conclude in thousands of cases that *"the religious life of the applicants there would actually lead to persecution"*?

Many converts have found their new faith outside their country of origin. They therefore have no personal history of persecution to refer to. This post-facto motive is often cited by the German authorities as a reason for refusing protection status.

Others became Christians in their homeland but hid this out of fear and could not attend church services nor be baptized.

Is it possible to predict future faith behavior in a country where Christians are persecuted? Is hiding their faith a guarantee that they can lead a safe life in a country where they otherwise might face the death penalty? Such reasoning assumes European standards (constitutional state, individualism) and

fails to consider the local conventions (community and clan culture, understanding of shame and honor, ethnic and linguistic peculiarities, etc.).

Clerical affidavits – basis for prognosis on probable persecution

Thousands of converts have submitted a certificate from their church congregation to the BAMF and ACs, confirming their faith – participation in congregational life, cooperation in the congregation, etc. From this, a prognosis could easily be made as to how the person's faith life will proceed in the future. In general, church certificates are the safest and best documented source for making a prognosis in this regard:

- A) The affidavits come from experts in Christian matters of faith.
- B) The pastors and priests have usually accompanied the baptized over an extended period and experience these persons in everyday life. They are therefore, in the best position to make a reliable assessment of whether and how the Christian faith is lived out.
- C) Employees of the BAMF and the administrative courts are hardly able to give such an assessment after a two-to-five-hour conversation, nor are they experts in matters of faith.
- D) Nonetheless, church certificates are often ignored by the BAMF and the ACs, although the BAMF pays lip service to how important they are. This does not fit together. Open Doors had already documented this issue in the October 2019 survey. The asylum situation of converts has improved little if at all since then.

Therefore, it was necessary to once again collect and evaluate facts and figures on the current asylum situation of converts. This resulted in the report presented here.

3. Objectives of the survey

This survey aims to shed light on the issues mentioned in the introduction. Based on the collected data about converts, it will be examined whether their applications for asylum protection are processed to their disadvantage. To this end, the observations made by pastors, priests, and parishes in the asylum process of converts were also evaluated as part of the survey.

In an interview with Deutsche Welle BAMF department head Ursula Gräfin Praschma expressed the following: *"If someone is baptized in Germany, then he (she) is a Christian, and we do not question his (her) being a Christian"*. It will be examined how this principle is applied in practice.

In this context, it should be further determined whether, and to what extent, certificates of baptism and faith are considered in the asylum process. Does the current statement of the BAMF department head Ursula Gräfin Praschma, *"That is why it is always very helpful for us to receive affidavits from the church as to what the life*

of faith in the church actually looks like," correspond to the experiences of church communities?

What are the consequences for converts?

The study is also geared towards ensuring that the assessment of the conversion as well as the faith life of converts is evaluated according to uniform criteria. Essential bases for this are:

- a) the situation in their countries of origin,
- b) the validity of clerical affidavits,
- c) the statements of the converts in the asylum procedure.

A further aim of the survey is to prevent the deportation of converts to countries where Christians are very severely persecuted or to suspend this practice completely.

4. Procedure

The persons described as converts in the study are all former Muslims who – before, during or after their flight – have turned to faith in Jesus Christ. The study focuses on converts who have found a spiritual home in a church congregation in Germany that has certified their participation in congregational life and the seriousness of their Christian faith.

The questionnaire (see Chapter 13 "Appendixes ") was sent on June 9th, 2021, to those 177 church congregations that had participated in the Open Doors' July 2019 survey of refugee converts in Germany. These churches were known to be ministering to refugee converts. The questionnaire was also sent to other churches, in particular the network of the Working Group for Religious Freedom (AKREF) of the Evangelical Alliance Germany.

In the cover letter and in the questionnaire, the participating congregations were assured of absolute confidentiality. The names of the individual congregations and the converts were not to be published. In addition, only totals or mean values are given in the report.

By 7/7/2021, 108 of the initial 177 congregations contacted responded (response rate 61 %). Of the additional congregations contacted, 25 congregations plus 2 local Evangelical Alliances responded. Of the 135 participating congregations from Protestant state and free churches, 113 provided quantitative information (= numbers). 22 others provided qualitative information (= comments). The 113 congregations served a total of 5,207 converts. 56 congregations are of the state church and 77 are free churches in addition to 2 local Evangelical Alliances. Some reported heart-breakingly difficult experiences; others reported that all the converts they cared for were granted asylum.

5. Underlying data at a glance

The data collection was carried out from June 9th to July 6th, 2021, the last responses considered were received on July 6th, 2021.

5,207 refugee converts from 113 congregations were quantitatively evaluated, of whom 2,045 had been rejected by the BAMF and 1,400 rejected by the administrative courts between 2017 and May 2021 despite having presented a certificate of faith. Ninety-nine converts were deported.

5.1. Participating congregations

Feedback from congregations came from all 16 federal states, from both free and state (regional Lutheran/Protestant) churches.

Despite increased efforts, only a few foreign-language congregations from relevant language groups participated in the survey. Some of them expressed security concerns (endangering their parishioners), others lacked concrete data or found the effort to obtain and compile it too excessive.

These and other circumstances limited the quantitative data collection. The qualitative data will be further explored later on (see chapter 7 "Voices from congregations that participated in the survey").

The 133 congregations involved are distributed exclusively between Protestant state churches⁶ (42.1 %) and Protestant free churches (57.9 %).

Of the state churches, 33 Protestant congregations, 16 independent state church communities/evangelical city missions and 7 Independent Evangelical Lutheran congregations (SELK) responded.

Among the free churches, a distinction was made between Free Evangelical Congregations (FeG), Evangelical Free Churches (EFG/Baptists), congregations from the Federation of Free Pentecostal Churches (BFP), Methodist Churches (EmK), Free Churches of the Brethren, Seventh-day Adventists and free church congregations (others).

The geographical spread of the participants includes all federal states. Most congregations are in Bavaria, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony.

⁶ Congregations of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK), although legally a free church, were counted among the Protestant churches because of their understanding of baptism and congregation.

Dispersion of the congregations with quantitative data of the recorded converts

State	Pop. (Mio.)	Evangelical State Churches		Evangelical Free Churches		Total	
		#Cong.	#Conv.	#Cong.	#Conv.	#Cong.	#Conv.
Bavaria	13.1	10	136	13	581	23	717
Baden-Wuerttemberg	11.1	14	275	10	391	24	666
Berlin	3.7	1	988	1	73	2	1,061
Brandenburg	2.5	3	54	1	5	4	59
Bremen	0.7	2	643	0	0	2	643
Hamburg	1.9	0	0	1	10	1	10
Hesse	6.3	3	48	11	532	14	580
Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	1.6	0	0	3	58	3	58
Lower Saxony	8.0	1	8	7	165	8	173
North Rhine-Westphalia	17.9	2	81	11	540	13	621
Rhineland-Palatinate	4.1	3	47	1	14	4	61
Saarland	1.0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Saxony	4.1	4	205	0	0	4	205
Saxony-Anhalt	2.2	2	142	0	0	2	142
Schleswig-Holstein	2.9	0	0	6	157	6	157
Thuringia	2.1	3	54	0	0	3	54
Germany	83.2	48	2,681	65	2,526	113	5,207

The figures for #Cong. / #Conv. refer to the current survey.

Among the 113 congregations providing quantitative data, there were a total of 5,207 converts. This gives an average of 46 converts per congregation. Participating State church congregations cared for 2,681 refugee converts while Protestant free churches cared for 2,526. The number of converts is unevenly distributed among the individual congregations. Most participating congregations ministered to a small number of converts. A minority of congregations, each with a high number of converts, accounted for about half of the total number of converts recorded.

Distribution of converts among congregations

Converts / Congregation	Congregations	Total converts	Percentage of converts
Until 9	33	144	2.8 %
10–25	34	541	10.4 %
26–50	21	727	14.0 %
51–100	17	1,210	23.2 %
101–150	3	353	6.8 %
151 and more	5	2,232	42.9 %
Totals	113	5,207	100 %

The figures on congregations / converts refer to the present study.

5.2. Convert origin

The most common country of origin was Iran (3,081 = 61 %), followed by Syria (855 = 17 %), Afghanistan (754 = 15 %), Iraq (206 = 4.1 %), Pakistan (54 = 1.1 %), Eritrea (28 = 0.6 %), Nigeria (28 = 0.6 %), China (11), Azerbaijan (9), Armenia (6), Ethiopia (5), Turkey (3), Tajikistan (2), Congo (2), Yemen (1), Ghana (1), and Somalia (1). Other individuals were named summarily, and occasionally several nationalities were grouped together in the questionnaire. From the data collected, 5,057 of the 5,207 converts could be clearly assigned to a country of origin.

Countries of origin and number of converts

Country	Iran	Syria	Afghanistan	Iraq	Pakistan	Eritrea	Nigeria
Converts	3,081	855	754	206	54	28	28

The figures on converts refer to the present study.

5.3. Consideration of religious affidavits

On request, church congregations issue so-called "clerical affidavits of faith" for the converts they care for, to be presented to the authorities. With the affidavits, the parishes certify the seriousness of the change of faith and the participation of the converts in parish life, usually beyond mere worship service attendance.

The 113 congregations that had provided quantitative data reported 3,544 rejections of asylum seekers by the BAMF and the ACs despite the presentation of clerical affidavits. State church congregations cited 2,389 rejections, and the Protestant free churches cited 1,155 rejections despite having issued affidavits.

Of the 3,544 rejections among 5,207 converts, 2,045 rejections came from the BAMF, 1,400 from the ACs and 99 were deportations.

5.4. BAMF protection rates and rejection of converts

The BAMF decision (notification) statistics show that the protection rates for Iranians, Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis have fallen significantly in recent years. Refugees from all four countries have been granted protection by the BAMF less frequently since 2018.

BAMF protection rate Iran

Iranian	2017	2018	2019	2020	January–May 2021
BAMF decisions	30,626	11,430	10,356	7,917	2,024
Of which refusals⁷	15,483	8,715	8,264	6,117	1,543
Without protection	50.6 %	76.2 %	79.8 %	77.3 %	76.2 %

Extrapolation of the number of converts among refugees from Iran

Of the Iranian refugees, an average of 44 % stated at their BAMF hearing that they are Christians, according to the "Bundesamt in Zahlen" BAMF-reports. According to the 2011 census⁸, 99.4 % of Iranian citizens are Muslims. It can therefore be assumed that most of the Iranian refugees registered as "Christians" by the BAMF are converts. The BAMF did not register how many of them received a negative BAMF decision. However, based on the available figures, it can be estimated that it must be several thousand.

7 Neither subsidiary protection nor deportation ban.

8 Wikipedia. Iran.

On: <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran#Bev%C3%B6lkerungsentwicklung>. Last accessed on: 08/11/2021.

BAMF protection rate Syria

Syrian	2017	2018	2019	2020	January– May 2021
BAMF decisions	99,527	43,875	45,838	38,710	32,399
Of which refusals⁹	8,416	7,945	7,471	4,221	18,763
Without protection	8.5 %	18.1 %	16.3 %	10.9 %	57.9 %

The BAMF protection rate for Syrians has fallen significantly in 2021.

BAMF protection rate Afghanistan

Afghans	2017	2018	2019	2020	January– May 2021
BAMF decisions	115,537	18,627	12,109	10,803	5,330
Of which refusals¹⁰	51,169	11,646	7,504	6,217	3,333
Without protection	44.3 %	62.5 %	62.0 %	57.5 %	62.5 %

Extrapolation of the number of converts among refugees from Afghanistan

At their BAMF hearing, an average of 2.6 % of Afghan refugees stated that they were Christians during the study period 2017 to May 2021, while "The-World-Factbook" of the CIA¹¹ in 2009 assumed 99.7 % Muslims in the Afghan population. It can therefore be assumed that most of the Afghan refugees registered as "Christians" by the BAMF are converts. The BAMF does not register how many of them have been rejected. However, based on the available figures, it can be estimated that it must be several hundred.

Due to the rise of the Taliban, the BAMF suspended pending decisions on asylum applications from Afghans in mid-August 2021. With the fall of the capital Kabul, the Islamists have taken power in the country. No deportations to Afghanistan have taken place since August 11. The Interior Minister wants to wait for a new situation report from the Foreign Office first. He thus backed away from the position that it was legitimate to repatriate criminals to the crisis country.¹²

9 Neither subsidiary protection nor deportation ban.

10 Neither subsidiary protection nor deportation ban.

11 CIA. Afghanistan.

On: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/afghanistan/#people-and-society>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

12 Cf. RND. Report: Bamf suspends decisions on asylum applications of Afghans.

On: <https://www.rnd.de/politik/bericht-bamf-setzt-entscheidungen-ueber-asylantraege-von-afghanen-aus-4VMAOMDIVJAMBGQGC6W2227TYY.html>. Last accessed on: 08/13/2021.

BAMF protection rate Iraq

Iraqi	2017	2018	2019	2020	January– May 2021
BAMF decisions	71,703	20,033	17,694	12,852	4,626
Of which refusals¹³	31,446	13,564	11,509	8,156	3,179
Without protection	43.9 %	67.7 %	65.0 %	63.5 %	68.7 %

The BAMF protection quota for Iraqis has fallen markedly over the past few years.

5.5. Converts from Iran and other countries

A refusal of asylum does not necessarily mean that a convert's faith has been doubted. In some cases, repatriation may have been considered reasonable or a conversion in Germany may not have played a role in the decision. Nevertheless, it does mean that they have received an order to return to a country where they must fear for their personal safety and freedom because of their faith.

The largest group of refugee converts served by the 113 congregations was that of 3,081 Iranians (some of whose asylum procedures took place outside the study period). 1,484 rejections following BAMF hearings were reported, representing a rejection rate of at least 48 %. The administrative courts rejected 980 Iranian converts during the same period, which represents a rejection rate of over 32 %.

The 113 participating congregations reported 54 Iranian converts who were deported during the same period despite having a certificate of faith – either directly to Iran or to another EU country (Dublin III), possibly with a subsequent deportation to Iran.

It is important to distinguish between members of a Christian minority in Iran (e.g. Armenians) and a Christian convert, since a conversion away from Islam is sanctioned by the Iranian government and Muslim fundamentalists, putting a convert's life in danger.

Converts from Syria

The 113 congregations reported 855 Syrian converts, nine of whom received rejections from the BAMF between 2017 and May 2021, despite the pastor's or priest's affidavit. Five of the above were not granted protection status by administrative courts. However, the very large majority have been granted protection status (at least a ban on deportation). It is nevertheless worrying that the BAMF protection rate for all refugees from Syria has fallen significantly in 2021.

13 Neither subsidiary protection nor deportation ban.

Converts from Afghanistan

The congregations reported 754 Afghan converts in their care, of whom 462 were rejected by the BAMF in the reporting period despite clerical affidavits. In 367 cases, the administrative courts confirmed the rejection. Sixteen Afghan converts were deported to Afghanistan or to another EU country (Dublin III).

BAMF reports for 2017–2021 show a rejection rate of 49 % for Afghans and 63 % for AC judgments; it appears that converts were no better off than other applicants.

On July 10th, Deutschlandfunk reported¹⁴ that more than 1,100 Afghan refugees had been deported from Germany to Kabul since the end of 2016 – but the report did not specify how many converts were among them. According to BAMF reports¹⁵, 2.6 %¹⁶ of Afghan refugees had identified themselves as Christians in BAMF hearings between 2017 and May 2021. Assuming a proportionate deportation rate of Afghan converts, we can assume 30 Afghan Christians deported. Newspaper reports¹⁷ support this assumption.

Converts from Iraq

The congregations reported 206 Iraqi converts, of whom 40 were rejected by the BAMF and 13 by administrative courts during the study period despite clerical affidavits. Ten were deported to Iraq or to another EU country (Dublin III) despite faith certification.

The BAMF reports show a rejection rate of 54 % and 88 % for AC judgments (for the period 2017–2019). The figures reported here for converts are significantly lower.

14 Deutschlandfunk. Afghanistan calls on Europe to halt deportations.

On: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/fluechtlinge-afghanistan-ruft-europa-zu-abschiebestopp-auf.1939.de.html?drn:news_id=1279184. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

15 BAMF. Das Bundesamt in Zahlen.

On: <https://www.bamf.de/DE/Themen/Statistik/Asylzahlen/BundesamtInZahlen/bundesamtinzahlen-node.html>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

16 Bundesamt in Zahlen 2020: P. 24 cites 2 % Christians among Afghans at initial hearings in 2020. Bundesamt in Zahlen 2019: P. 28 cites 2.4 % Christians among Afghans for initial hearings in 2019. Bundesamt in Zahlen 2018: P. 28 names for the Initial hearings in 2018 3.3 % Christians among Afghans. Analogously for the year 2017. Considering the number of cases of Afghans over the 5 years of our study period 2017 to May 2021, the (weighted) mean value is 2.6 %.

17 B.Z. Konvertierte Christen sollen raus aus Deutschland.

On: <https://www.bz-berlin.de/berlin/konvertierte-christen-sollen-raus-aus-deutschland>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

stern. Die Geschichten hinter den 69 Afghanen, über die Horst Seehofer zynisch scherzte.

On: <https://www.stern.de/politik/deutschland/nach-afghanistan-abgeschoben--wer-sind-die-69-betroffenen--8187742.html>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

Sonntagsblatt. Hofer Kirchenvorsteher aus Afghanistan droht Abschiebung - jetzt deutet sich ungewöhnliche Lösung an.

On: <https://www.sonntagsblatt.de/artikel/bayern/es-gibt-eine-konkrete-bleibeperspektive>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

Bayrischer Rundfunk. Kirchenvorsteher soll nach Afghanistan abgeschoben werden.

On: <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/kirchenvorsteher-soll-nach-afghanistan-abgeschoben-werden,SBCb2Ud>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

taz. Zurück in den Krieg.

On: <https://taz.de/Bilanz-der-Abschiebung-nach-Afghanistan!/5643943/>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

Converts from Pakistan, Nigeria and other countries

The 113 participating parishes reported on 54 Pakistani converts. Eight were rejected by the BAMF despite clerical affidavits, ten failed before an administrative court and one Pakistani convert was deported. Similar findings can be seen in BAMF reports, which show a 95 % rejection rate for Pakistani asylum seekers from 2017–2021 and 90 % for AC decisions.

The 113 congregations also reported on 28 Nigerian converts, 12 of whom were rejected by the BAMF (43 %) and six of whom failed in administrative courts during the study period despite having a faith reference. Twelve Nigerian converts were deported.

BAMF reports show similar figures for Nigerian asylum seekers in general: 87 % rejection rate at BAMF and 95 % at ACs. Converts did not fare much better.

Other cases, including Chinese (11), Azerbaijani (9), Armenians (6), Ethiopians (5), Turkish (3), Tajiks (2) and Congolese (2) were recorded.

5.6. The significance of the survey

In order to appreciate this study, it is important to know what percentage of all refugee convert cases is represented.

Based on the BAMF figures – i.e., the overall number of refugees and the number of negative decisions issued, as well as the number of "Christian" refugees– the present survey, represents approximately 8 % of the population of refugee converts in Germany. In Germany, more than 1,000 Christian congregations care for refugee converts and have integrated them into their communities (only 113 participated). This means that the number of rejected converts may be up to twelve times larger than the number recorded in the survey.

The large number of refusals despite the certificates of faith issued by clergy members demonstrates that these are not isolated cases but a structural problem.

6. The purpose of faith affidavits

Faith affidavits for converts are not sufficiently considered

The faith affidavits provide the decision-makers at the BAMF and the administrative courts with a reliable basis for making a prognosis about the expected life of faith in the event of deportation of a convert to his or her country of origin. The faith affidavits in question are particularly authoritative if they demonstrate that converts have already been actively living their faith for years.

Legally questionable procedure

If due process is denied in that German authorities ignore or even deliberately reject meaningful and robust evidence from experts, their decisions lose legitimacy. This adequately describes what is happening by the BAMF and administrative courts in their handling of certificates issued by clergymen involved in care of the asylum applicants.

According to the Federal Government of Germany – and in particular the Federal Ministry of the Interior – the subjective assessment of BAMF-decision-makers and administrative judges regarding the authenticity of a conversion, is given more weight than the word of clerics whose assessment has taken months and sometimes even years. Although matters of faith are their profession, the clerics have allegedly erred in thousands of cases in their assessment of the authenticity of a conversion. To compound the matter, thousands of asylum claims previously rejected by the BAMF have been overturned by some administrative courts, whereas in other administrative courts almost no converts are granted protection status.

What is the reason for the widely differing rejection rates?

The discrepancy in rejection rates for converts from Iran in the various federal states also raise questions. In a state of due process, one would expect a uniform approach to the asylum proceedings, so that there should only be minor deviations from one federal state to the next. Therefore, if rejection rates for converts of similar background (i.e. Iran) vary greatly between the individual federal states, the neutrality of the authorities is brought into question.

Rejections of Iranian converts by the BAMF from 2017–May 2021 by state

State	converts in care	thereof rejections	in percentage
Lower Saxony	146	13	8.9 %
Baden-Württemberg	397	95	23.9 %
Hesse	366	94	25.7 %
Bavaria	481	180	37 %
North Rhine-Westphalia	509	229	45 %
Schleswig-Holstein	88	66	75 %
Berlin	700	659	94 %

The figures on congregations / converts refer to the present study.

How can the authorities account for the fact that more than 90 % of Iranian converts are rejected in Berlin versus only 9 % in Lower Saxony?

Concerning Berlin, it should be noted that the parish with the most converts – that is the Evangelisch-Lutherische Dreieinigkeits-Gemeinde (SELK) of Pastor Dr. Gottfried Martens – did not participate in this survey, because the workload for submitting the figures for the study was too great at the present.

Voices from numerous participating churches (see Chapter 7) mention this perceived "arbitrariness" on behalf of the BAMF and administrative decisions concerning converts in their care. Even converts serving and teaching on church staff for years, as well as others heavily involved in church life, are doubted by the BAMF and/or administrative courts of having had the Christian faith "shape their identity".

This is like a vote of no confidence by the authorities against the entire profession of ministers in Germany.

Quotes: Criticism of BAMF faith tests / BAMF doubts about clerical affidavits.

The practice of faith tests by the BAMF and the disregard of clerical affidavits has also been criticized by leaders of the churches, as the following quotes show.

Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD)

*"There can be no examination of faith by persons who have no competence to do so, nor can it be doubted that those who are baptized by the church are baptized with serious motives."*¹⁸

18 Schleswig-Holsteinischer Zeitungsverlag. Taufe und Flüchtlinge: Wenn das Amt den Glauben testet. On: <https://www.shz.de/regionales/schleswig-holstein/taufe-und-fluechtlinge-wenn-das-amt-den-glauben-testet-id15622691.html>. Last accessed on: 08/24/2021.

*"In clear terms the bishop criticized the 'faith tests' of the Nuremberg based Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) as well as the courts. Often the seriousness of the conversion of refugees is doubted for reasons incomprehensible to the church, and on this basis the asylum application is rejected. Clerical affirmation and testimony on the other hand are dismissed as not meaningful."*¹⁹

*EKD leader Bedford-Strohm demands a regulation 'that prevents people who have converted from Islam to Christianity from being deported to countries such as Afghanistan or Iran, where converted Christians cannot live their religion safely'. It must be clear that 'the state cannot judge the seriousness of a request for baptism, but only the church'."*²⁰

Margot Käßmann, former Chairwoman of the Council of the EKD

*"The seriousness of a request for baptism is decided by the church, not the state," she told [the magazine] pro in March, adding, 'Ministry is my profession. For almost eleven years I was the state bishop of a church with about 2,000 pastors. None of us baptizes just for the sake of it or for residency purposes.'"*²¹

Thomas Schirmmacher, General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance

*"It is a scandal that currently nearly all converts from Islam to Christianity are denied asylum."*²²

Hermann Glettler, Roman Catholic diocesan bishop of the diocese of Innsbruck

*"As Church leaders, we strongly oppose asylum courts reviewing a refugee's faith as government interference in religious affairs. The judgment about the authenticity of one's faith decision cannot and must not happen in a judicial interview. That is for the church authorities alone to assess."*²³

19 Evangelisch.de. Bedford-Strohm: Keine integrierten Flüchtlinge abschieben.

On: <https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/162891/25-11-2019/bedford-strohm-keine-integrierten-fluechtlinge-abschieben>.
Last accessed on: 08/24/2021.

20 WELT. Das Jahr 2019 ist eines der blutigsten für die Christen.

On: <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article204331096/Verfolgung-Das-Jahr-2019-ist-eines-der-blutigsten-fuer-die-Christen.html>.
Last accessed on: 08/24/2021.

21 PRO Medienmagazin. Generalverdacht gegen Konvertiten.

On: <https://www.pro-medienmagazin.de/generalverdacht-gegen-konvertiten/>. Last accessed on: 08/24/2021.

22 Thomas Schirmmacher, Blog. „Es ist ein Skandal, dass derzeit fast allen Konvertiten vom Islam zum Christentum das Asyl verweigert wird“.

On: <https://www.thomasschirmmacher.info/blog/es-ist-ein-skandal-dass-derzeit-fast-allen-konvertiten-vom-islam-zum-christentum-das-asyl-verweigert-wird/>. Last accessed on: 08/24/2021.

23 Meinbezirk.at. Entsetzen über Abschiebung von Konvertiten.

On: https://www.meinbezirk.at/innsbruck/c-gedanken/entsetzen-ueber-abschiebung-von-konvertiten_a3913278.
Last accessed on: 08/24/2021.

6.1. Situation in the converts' countries of origin

After the publication of the initial study in October 2019, Open Doors offered the BAMF to provide information about the situation of traditional and converted Christians in their countries of origin. Despite receiving this extensive and detailed information (without compromising safety) the BAMF's rejection of asylum-seeking converts did not decrease.

In Afghanistan, the threat to Christians (converts) continues to worsen in the face of the rise of the Taliban and other Islamist groups. As a result of the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan, the extremely high level of persecution of Christians will increase. In neighboring Pakistan, Christians have been subjected to an extremely high level of violence and discrimination for years. One example is the case of Asia Bibi, who was to be hanged for alleged blasphemy of the Muslim Prophet. Her release after sitting innocent on death row for more than eight years, led to riots and mass protests throughout the country.

Political developments in Iran regarding converted and traditional Christians

The situation for converts in Iran has been highly dangerous for years. The new fundamentalist President Ebrahim Raisi will take even more decisive action against the (illegal) Christian house churches where converts meet. (See also chapter 9).

Below are reports from various Christian NGOs, either in full or in excerpts. They provide insights into how the regime systematically acts against Christian converts.

Iran passes bill that threatens further repression of Christian converts²⁴

Iranian president Hassan Rouhani has signed into law two controversial amendments to the Penal Code, which it is feared will be used to further clamp down on unrecognised religious minorities, including Christian converts.

The amendments affect two articles of the Penal Code that are routinely used in the prosecution of converts: Articles 499 and 500.

Indeed, every one of the more than 20 Christians currently in prison on charges related to their peaceful religious activity were prosecuted under either or both Article 499 or 500, which relate respectively to membership or organisation of "anti-security groups", and "propaganda" against the state or in support of opposition groups.

²⁴ Article18. Iran passes bill that threatens further repression of Christian converts.
On: <https://articleeighteen.com/news/7872/>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

Of the two amendments, it is the amendment to Article 500 which will most concern advocates of freedom of religion in Iran – including the freedom to change one’s belief and to propagate it, as enshrined in Article 18 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a signatory, without reservation, and therefore legally bound to uphold.

ARTICLE 19, an organisation dedicated to the protection of freedom of speech, called the changes to Article 500 “a full-on attack on the right to freedom of religion and belief”.

The amended version of Article 500 provides for up to five years’ imprisonment for “any deviant educational or proselytising activity” by members of so-called “sects” that “contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam” through “mind-control methods and psychological indoctrination” or “making false claims or lying in religious and Islamic spheres, such as claiming divinity”.

Given that Iran’s judiciary, in its response to a UN letter of concern about alleged persecution of Christians, recently referred to imprisoned house-church members as belonging to “cults”, it is easy to see how the new provisions may be used to further clamp down on them.

The same is true of the amendment to Article 499, relating to membership or organisation of “anti-security groups”; in its response to the UN, the Iranian judiciary called house-churches “enemy groups” with “anti-security purposes”, while claiming “nobody is prosecuted on religious grounds”.

The new amendment to Article 499 provides for up to five years’ imprisonment for “anyone who insults Iranian ethnicities or divine religions or Islamic schools of thought recognised under the Constitution with the intent to cause violence or tensions in the society or with the knowledge that such [consequences] will follow”.

As ARTICLE 19 noted in its analysis, the vaguely-worded amendment “grant[s] extensive interpretive discretion to the prosecutorial and judicial authorities, providing a fertile ground for arbitrary arrest and detention” and will “further tighten the already shrunken space for freedom of expression in the country”.

In both cases, the punishment can be doubled to up to 10 years’ imprisonment if the groups in question have received either financial or organisational help from outside the country.

Background

The amendments were first proposed in Iran’s parliament in May last year, but were twice rejected by the Guardian Council, which must approve all bills. In July, the council sought eight clarifications, the majority of which related to overly “ambiguous” language. Then, in November, it returned a second version to the parliament for further changes. But throughout the process, it seemed a question of when, not if, the bill would pass into law.

The main changes to the originally proposed bill are to Article 499.

The original version imposed punishments on “anyone who insults Iranian ethnicities with the intent to cause discord, violence or tensions in the society, or with the knowledge that such [consequences] will follow, or, with the same intention or knowledge, directs explicit curses at divine religions recognised under the Constitution”.

The final version gives more detail: “Anyone who insults Iranian ethnicities or divine religions or Islamic schools of thought recognised under the Constitution, with the intent to cause violence or tensions in the society, or, with the knowledge that such [consequences] will follow, will be sentenced to a degree-five imprisonment and/or fine if the [offence] does not fall under hudud [punishment fixed by God] and causes violence or tension. Otherwise, (s)he will be sentenced to a degree-six imprisonment or fine.”

But while this provide some extra clarity, it still offers the judiciary plenty of room for manoeuvre. Article18’s advocacy director, Mansour Borji, called the amendments “a catastrophe” and “disservice to justice”.

“These amendments will bring more ambiguity to an already ambiguous set of charges,” he said, “and decrease the chance that a judge may act in a more tolerant way towards house-church members, by providing greater scope within the law to bring charges on these vaguely-defined grounds.

“This news will be celebrated by Iran’s intelligence agencies, who are always in the background in court cases against Christians, pressuring judges to impose the harshest possible sentence.”

Human rights lawyer Hossein Ahmadi-niaz previously warned that the bill, if passed, would “facilitate the repression and punishment of Christian converts and others belonging to unrecognised religious groups”.

“The law should protect citizens, including Christian converts and Baha’is, against the government,” he said. “But in Iran the law has become a tool to justify the government’s violent treatment of converts and other unrecognised minorities.”

Meanwhile, Hamid Gharagozloo from the International Organisation to Preserve Human Rights (IOPHR) cautioned: “By making it a crime to be part of a sect, and banning a group as a ‘sect’, it gives them an open hand to crush any form of uprising or dissatisfaction with the government... Any form of defiance will be labelled as a ‘sect’, and then it will be punishable by law.”

*Christian converts given maximum five-year sentences under penal code amendments*²⁵

Three Christian converts have been given the maximum sentence of five years each in prison under controversial recent amendments to Iran's penal code. Amin Khaki, Milad Goodarzi and Alireza Nourmohammadi, who were also each fined 40 million tomans (\$1,800), have been convicted of "engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam" – words lifted directly from the newly amended Article 500.

They were informed of the verdicts, which they intend to appeal, on Saturday, 26 June, at the 4th Branch of the Revolutionary Court in Karaj. They had been summoned two days earlier, following a short hearing at the same court on Monday 21 June, during which the Christians were forced to defend themselves after the judge, Mehdi Zeinali, claimed their lawyer had not completed the necessary documentation.

Having asked whether they may bring their lawyer with them on Saturday, the Christians were told they were not entitled to a lawyer – a clear breach both of their rights and Iran's constitution. Article 35 of the constitution states that "in all courts" (*italics added*), defendants are "entitled to select a lawyer for themselves".

Amin, Milad and Alireza, who have already spent time in prison for their Christian activities, are the first known examples of Christians being charged – and now convicted – under the newly amended Article 500.

What were the charges based on?

The charges against them followed coordinated raids by intelligence agents on their homes, and on the homes of nine other Christian families in Fardis, in November 2020. None of the Christians were arrested at that time, but many of their personal belongings were confiscated – including phones, laptops, Bibles, Christian literature and anything else to do with Christianity. The Christian items have not been returned.

Then in the space of two weeks in January and February 2021, a member of each family was summoned for interrogation and ordered to sign commitments to refrain from meeting together – either in person or online.

As Article18 noted at the time, Iranian Christians are routinely asked during interrogations to sign commitments to refrain from gathering together in house-churches, but this was the first known example of intelligence officials demanding they sign a commitment to have no further social engagements together at all, including online.

And once again, it was a direct result of the newly amended Article 500, which prohibits "psychological manipulation" or so-called "mind control" by members of "sects" – in the "real or virtual sphere", i.e. in person or online.

²⁵ Article18. Christian converts given maximum five-year sentences under penal code amendments. On: <https://articleeighteen.com/news/8876/>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

When the Christians refused to sign the commitments, they were threatened with long prison sentences and told it would be better for them if they left the country.

Then in May, Amin, Milad and Alireza were officially charged, and each forced to submit bail of 250 million tomans (around \$12,000) and told they must report weekly to the intelligence branch of Iran's police force for the next six months. The other Christians have also been threatened with imprisonment or other ramifications, such as employment restrictions.

*Iran's parliament backs death sentence for 'cooperating' with 'hostile states'*²⁶

Iran's parliament has passed the first draft of a bill that champions the death penalty for anyone convicted of "spying" for or "cooperating" with "hostile states" – "especially the United States".

The bill, which was passed on 8 June, supposedly seeks to address "ambiguities" within Iran's penal code regarding the "identification of hostile countries", as well as "weak" deterrents against alleged anti-state actors.

The news should concern advocates for human rights in Iran, including for Iran's religious minorities, given that Revolutionary Courts routinely label any action that deviates from the wishes of the regime to be an "action against national security".

And as Hamid Gharagozloo from the International Organisation to Preserve Human Rights noted, "Every minority has been labelled as an 'agent of foreign powers, with the aim overthrowing the regime'."

How could the bill affect Christians?

House-churches are among the many groups to have been denounced by the regime as "hostile" entities, with virtually every recent prosecution of Christians citing their membership of such "enemy" groups, and some even referencing alleged collaboration with "foreign" or "Zionist" entities such as the USA and Israel.

Some Christians have even been specifically convicted of "spying" in recent years, such as Iranian-Assyrian church leader Shamiram Issavi, who was sentenced to five years in prison in 2018 for "acting against national security by ... training Christian leaders in Iran for the purposes of espionage".

If the new bill were to become law, such a conviction could lead to the death sentence.

The first article of the bill states that "spying or cooperation with hostile states, including the United States government, against national security or national interests, will be considered an act of 'corruption on Earth' [mofsed fel-arz]", which under Article 286 of the Islamic Penal Code is punishable by death.

²⁶ Article18. Iran's parliament backs death sentence for 'cooperating' with 'hostile states'.
On: <https://articleeighteen.com/news/8903/>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

An Iranian Christian convert now seeking asylum in Germany told Article18 recently that intelligence agents in Iran had alleged that the girls refuge she had set up had been “purchased with the help of foreign Christians, with the aim of leading the girls away from Islam”. “The interrogators wanted to know more about how I’d set up the refuge, and where I’d got the money,” Bitia Rezaee explained. “They thought we were funded by churches in America.”

Christian convert Ebrahim Firouzi, who has spent years in prison and is now living in enforced internal exile, is another who has been quizzed for relations with supposedly “hostile groups”, including Article18.

Last year, the prosecutor in Ebrahim’s city of exile queried why he had contacted “foreign” media outlets such as Article18, while among the charges leading to his original prison sentence – back in 2013 – were “communication with anti-revolutionary elements in foreign countries and foreign anti-revolutionary channels”.

Again, were this bill to be passed, it is not inconceivable that such charges could eventually lead to a conviction of “corruption on Earth”, and the death sentence.

Farshid Fathi, who spent five years in prison, is another well-known example of a Christian convert convicted of, among other things, “acting against national security” by “communicating with foreign organisations”.

Meanwhile, Nasser Navard Gol-Tapeh, a Christian convert currently serving a 10-year prison sentence in Tehran’s Evin Prison, was convicted of alleged “organisational relations” with a foreign church in Sweden and the “Zionist Christianity” of UK-based Elam Ministries.

What else is in the bill?

Iranian legal expert Mohammad Moghimi told the US-based Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) that he was particularly puzzled by how the bill defines an “enemy state”.

“An enemy state refers to a government that is waging war against Iran, a status that needs to be determined by a court in a fair judicial process,” he said, before warning that such processes are “usually absent in the Revolutionary Court”.

The Mr Moghimi also highlighted how the bill suggests the establishment of a committee involving senior officials from the intelligence units of the Ministry of Intelligence, Revolutionary Guard Corps and army, who would decide on prosecutions in such cases.

“It would have been more appropriate if the courts were put in charge of such matters,” he told CHRI. “But in this form, the bill paves the way for the security agencies to exert greater influence. “These actions are aimed at increasing punishments and putting more pressure on civil rights activists and dissidents,” he added.

The bill also criminalises sending photographs or video footage of “crime scenes” to “enemy or foreign networks”. CHRI said such legislation is “designed to punish those who share visuals that could incriminate or embarrass the Islamic Republic of Iran, such as the killing of protesters by the security forces”.

The bill also pledges support for those “on the sanctions list of hostile governments, especially the United States”. These individuals, the bill says, “will benefit from the maximum limit of protection provided ... and the necessary judicial and legal measures will be taken to protect them”.

Iran implements persecution laws, looks to add more²⁷

Pressure builds in Iran as the regime implements severe new restrictions and looks to add more. “Pray for us,” Reza (Pseudonym) of Global Catalytic Ministries requests. “It’s going to be another season of persecution, and I have a feeling it’s going to be the worst we’ve seen inside of Iran.”

Last month, a judge gave three Christians from a Muslim background the maximum prison sentence under a newly-amended law. Eight believers were summoned to court last week under similar charges.

In June, “they gave the Christians the maximum sentence – which is five years – not the minimum... maybe [authorities will] let them out after two or three years, but right now, it’s a great fear technique,” Reza says. “If you get caught, and you get arrested for breaking this law, they’re going to ‘throw the book at you.’”

Persecution is legal in Iran

Iranian judges routinely use Article 499 and Article 500 of the Islamic Penal Code to persecute believers from a Muslim background. Controversial amendments passed in February mean “anything that’s against Sharia law, you can be arrested for now; that’s a very broad net,” Reza says. “The new law went into effect with the last president, but it was never enforced. This new president wants to enforce it.”

The amendments leave plenty of room for interpretation, which can be extremely dangerous for believers facing a hardline Islamic judge. “The problem with this law is now they are arresting Christians when they have Christian resources in their house,” Reza says. “Before, the Iranian government would never arrest you for having Christian items because you can always say, ‘The Old Testament and the New Testament are holy books, and I’m just reading them because the Koran says to read them.’ Now, they’re not even letting you read them for understanding more of the Koran, or [for] researching.”

Another new bill threatens to make the death penalty an option for Christian activity. Ask the Lord to give Iranian believers His supernatural strength and courage. “Pray for us because we want to be used by God. We don’t want to be intimidated by the enemy,” Reza says.

“We don’t want to live in fear; we want to live in faith.”

²⁷ Mission Network News. Iran implements persecution laws, looks to add more.

On: <https://www.mnnonline.org/news/iran-implements-persecution-laws-looks-to-add-more/>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

*Christians summoned to answer charges of 'propaganda against the Islamic Republic'*²⁸

Eight Christian converts in the southwestern city of Dezful have been summoned to answer charges of "propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran".

The eight Christians – Hojjat Lotfi Khalaf, Esmail Narimanpour, Alireza Varak-Shah, Mohammad Ali (Davoud) Torabi, Alireza Roshanaei Zadeh, Masoud Nabi, Mohammad Kayidgap, and Mohsen Saadati Zadeh – were summoned on Tuesday, 20 July, to appear at the 4th branch of the prosecutor's office of the Civil and Revolutionary Court of Dezful within five days.

Four of the men – Hojjat, Esmail, Davoud, and Alireza Varak-Shah – were arrested in April and released two days later, after signing statements pledging to appear when summoned.

Several other Christians were also interrogated at that time and ordered to sign commitments to refrain from further Christian activities, while some of the Christians, including Esmail, were beaten. Davoud has previously been arrested for his Christian activities – back in October 2017, when he was detained for a month.

The charges against the eight men fall under Article 500 of the Islamic Penal Code, one of two articles controversially amended earlier this year.

28 Article18. Christians summoned to answer charges of 'propaganda against the Islamic Republic'.
On: <https://articleeighteen.com/news/8977/>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

7. Voices from congregations that participated in the survey

The following statements complement the quantitative result that thousands of Christian converts in Germany did not receive asylum.

Of the 133 participating congregations and two local Evangelical Alliances, 85 provided qualitative responses to the study question, "Are there any observations related to the converts' situation that are important to you?" This section addresses a broad selection of the responses categorically. There were both positive and negative responses.

A few categorized remarks on the qualitative responses:

- A) Some congregations reported that the refugees they cared for were relocated, causing contact to break off (congregation #57; #78; #86; #89; #96; #112; #116; #117).
- B) Other congregations stated that no new refugees have joined them in recent years (#3; #48; #118).
- C) Some congregations indicated that they do not issue faith affidavits as a matter of policy; however, this was the underlying qualifier of this study (#19; #21; #57).
- D) Several congregations do not keep numerical records of refugees in their congregations or could only compile the figures at great expense (#15; #40; #46; #49; #57; #87; #97; #106; #116; #131).
- E) Due to recent pastor changes, numbers were not available (#18; #133; #134; #135).
- F) Due to feelings of shame and/or pride, refugees often do not speak about rejection in their congregation, so ministers do not know about it (#15; #21; #67; #125).
- G) Some refugees originally fled to Germany for reasons other than conversion. Therefore, their new faith is considered a post-facto reason that was not considered in their asylum process (#39; #44; #51; #84; #118; #129).
- H) Some congregations did not provide specific information, primarily out of concern for the safety of the converts in their congregation.
- I) The questionnaire, especially the splitting by calendar year, was found to be too complex (#39; #49; #57; #86; #116).
- J) Congregations cared for refugees who belonged to historical Oriental churches; however, they were not the subject of the current study (#118).
- K) Several asylum procedures are still ongoing (in some cases for years), so that congregations could not provide any information on their outcome (#39; #43; #51; #84; #87; #123).

The above limited the collection of quantitative data and explains the response rate of 61 %.

7.1. Clustered qualitative data

The excerpts presented below are mostly taken from a larger context and have been slightly revised for grammar and readability. Where deemed necessary, details of people and places have been alienated.

A pastor from Bavaria (church #54) emphasized a central thought in his commentary, *"There are people behind these numbers."*

7.2. The people behind the numbers

The following comments from the churches give insight into the situation of refugee converts. They are an expression of their thoughts and feelings.

The following was reported by a church (#35) in Schleswig-Holstein: *"Of course the situation of converts is very individual. But they all have one thing in common: the enormous psychological burden of having to live with an unresolved situation. These people arrived in Germany traumatized and cope differently with the challenges here. One woman, for example, is not even able to attend German language courses. She is undergoing psychiatric treatment and needs medication. Another woman distracts herself from her mental stress by doing just the opposite. She is learning languages and pushes ahead with her license to practice dentistry, even though her first asylum application was rejected in 2019 and she is living in great fear of her second interview, or another rejection. Another very young woman is highly motivated to integrate here despite the uncertain outcome of her asylum application. She is making very positive use of the waiting period."*

Not infrequently, converts staying in Germany suffer various fears. A comment from Baden-Wuerttemberg (church #123) reads: *"A person has been trying to get asylum for years, but only ever gets a suspension of the deportation order. The identity must be proven by passport. However, the passport was lost and other papers (birth certificate etc.) were presented but not recognized. The BAMF demanded the applicant attain a new passport from the Iranian embassy. The person, who had already experienced persecution in Iran because of her Christian faith, was afraid to enter the embassy lest they deport her."*

From Saxony-Anhalt (congregation #115): *"A young man from Iran is afraid of being deported at any time. In City X he saw a friend being deported who already had work and wanted to do an apprenticeship. He himself has his sights on an apprenticeship starting August but does not trust the authorities. The application for asylum was turned down and the authorities denied his faith. He says he was ridiculed in court because of this."*

How refugee converts deal with these fears, for example, is summed up by a congregation from Baden-Wuerttemberg (#107): *"Rejected asylum seekers partly retreat into anonymity or continue on at great risk to personal safety to England for example: 'I'd rather drown in the English Channel than go back to Iran.'" (Explanation: In Iran government action is often granted on the basis of personal contacts. Some*

asylum seekers therefore interpret a rejection by the authorities in Germany as a lack of support on the part of their church community or its lack of influence. Others withdraw out of disappointment or shame).

7.3. Praise and criticism of BAMF and administrative courts

In response to the question, if there are any "observations related to the converts' situation that are important to you" there were positive and negative comments on the BAMF and administrative courts.

A home group leader for refugees of a congregation in Bavaria (#48) reported: *"We had the good fortune (answer to prayer) at the administrative court in Würzburg that a judge recognized all of our estimated 15 affidavits of faith. They officially questioned us in person at the hearing and decided each time against the BAMF and in favor of the asylum seeker."*

The comprehensibility of negative decisions by state authorities was also expressed (Congregation #46 from Bavaria): *"We observe that the judges at the Administrative Court of Bayreuth no longer hold such preconceived opinions as in 2017 but are willing to listen. But we also notice that some refugees cannot represent themselves [Open Doors note: cannot present their case well], perhaps because then traumas would be opened, so we can understand the judges in their rejection."*

A staff member responsible for refugees in a congregation in Baden-Wuerttemberg (#70) wrote: *"In the administrative court in Stuttgart, there has been a change of heart in the judges, especially when it comes to Iranians. This has had an absolutely positive effect on the handling of refugees and the outcome of the vast majority of proceedings."*

A congregation (#85) from Baden-Wuerttemberg wrote: *"I read the interview with Gräfin Praschma in the newspaper PRO. She is right in what she says. I have found that in all the court hearings I have been to, the question of church involvement has been important. Asylum seekers who did not engage in church life were rejected."*

The pastor of a church from Hesse (#15) wrote: *"I was present at some court proceedings and always had the impression that the judge was fair. He always formed his own opinion about the activity of the summoned. Those who had nothing to show for their time here could expect rejection – despite the pastor's letter that the person was baptized and a church member."*

A pastor from Hesse (congregation #7) reported: *"At the hearing of the administrative court in Kassel, the judge took his time to talk to the asylum seeker about his faith. My affidavits and those of my colleague from the church where he now lives were appreciated, and I testified as a witness about his conversion. At the conclusion of the hearing, the judge made it clear that he was convinced that a serious conversion had taken place. He did not go into the further reasons for the rejection of*

the asylum application by the BAMF. He based his decision to grant the convert refugee status solely on his conversion and the consequences that await him would he return to Somalia. The verdict has recently become final."

A pastor from Brandenburg (congregation #37) wrote: *"I was present as a witness at four proceedings before the Potsdam Administrative Court, was able to testify and felt that the efforts of the judge(s) to have the identity-forming power of the refugees' Christianity presented in a comprehensible way were fair. All four received a residence permit for three years."*

A pastor from Baden-Wuerttemberg (congregation #64) summarized: *"The trials at the administrative court led predominantly to the annulment of the BAMF decisions."*

The previous voices referred to AC judges amongst others who revised the BAMF's negative decisions and ruled in favor of the converts. The following statements are more mixed.

From the state of Bremen came the feedback of one pastor (congregation #14): *"Here in the state of Bremen there is on the whole, thank God, no cause for complaint with regard to Iranian converts!"*

In contrast, a pastor from Thuringia (congregation #77) wrote: *"The BAMF rejects on principle - due to political influence. Even in the case of clear persecution (an Iranian with an outstanding arrest warrant) they refuse asylum. Also, baptismal certificates and parish testimony as well as testimonies of church members are ignored."*

Here is a comment from Rhineland-Palatinate (congregation #59): *"My impression is, that under the assumption of false pretense on behalf of the hearers, it is hardly possible for the converts to present their faith in such a way that it is convincing. Of course, it is also hard for decision-makers to make an assessment if they don't have their own connection to church and faith."*

Similarly, a contribution from Hesse (congregation #32): *"We observe that both the BAMF and the administrative courts increasingly describe the testimonies of converts as implausible. Even studies at a bible school is not accepted because 'you don't have to be a Christian for that'. In addition, questions are asked that even many German Christians would struggle to answer. To us, this approach seems politically motivated."*

"While courts are happy to use expert witnesses in all sorts of other matters, pastors in particular are not considered expert witnesses in matters of faith – here the judge decides that a conversion is only feigned." (Local Evangelical Alliance #99 from Schleswig-Holstein)

A congregational pastor from Lower Saxony (#11) wrote: *"I am personally shocked and ashamed both at the treatment of my Iranian brothers and sisters in the faith and at my experience with our legal system."*

All statements are to be understood as motivation to think about possible problems in dealing with refugee converts – at the BAMF and in the administrative courts.

7.4. Indications of problems within BAMF and administrative courts

Sorted by federal state, here are voices on problems that church congregations see with the BAMF and the administrative courts.

Congregations in Bavaria (congregation #46): *"We have different experiences with the BAMF. Some employees seem honestly interested. But for some, the refugee – as seen in their body language – is just a file on the computer. The follow-on applications are often rejected, so we are helpless."*

One pastor wrote (congregation #126), *"We have ministered to many refugees in our church community over the past few years and most of the time we have been very frustrated because we felt that the decision makers did not really listen to the accounts of the converts and our statements were not taken into consideration."*

The pastor (church #126): *"We are currently quite desperate with one couple, because all efforts have been in vain so far. They have since been stripped of their IDs and told that they must leave the country, but this has not yet been accomplished. They are now living every day in great fear. The two had fled Iran because they had become Christians there and their home group had been discovered. Other Christians of this group have disappeared. Only the two managed to escape. The decision-makers did not believe their story and concluded it was made-up. But I know the two very well, they are committed co-workers. I have no doubt about their story."*

Congregations in Baden-Wuerttemberg (congregation #25): *"I accompany an Iranian family who had applied for asylum, had the hearing in City X in 2016 and received a rejection in 2017. The man was in prison in Iran and had also experienced torture there. After the rejection, I wrote, among others, to the member of the Bundestag for our constituency, Representative Ms. Ronja Kemmer (MdB). Ms. Kemmer was very committed and contacted various authorities. Afterwards, there was a discussion with the deputy head of the BAMF. Among other things, the BAMF's guidelines for hearings of torture victims were pointed out. Ms. Kemmer complained that these had not been adhered to in this 'case'. The family was then promptly given a second hearing date. In the subsequent decision, the rejection was revised, and they were granted refugee status."*

Congregation (#25): *"The decision whether a conversion is 'genuine' can actually, in my opinion, not be made by people who have no relation to the Christian faith. The BAMF is probably overburdened with that."*

Congregations in Schleswig-Holstein (congregation #124): *"The judge does not ask the plaintiffs any questions, but only asks if they have any additions. He rejects requests to present evidence concerning the hearing of witnesses. [...] In addition, there is already a pending disciplinary action against him for numerous malfeasances. In the past, he has demonstrably manipulated the minutes of oral hearings and induced witnesses to give false testimony. He consistently obstructs attorneys in the legal representation of their clients by not allowing them to speak and refusing requests to reschedule."*

Congregations in Lower Saxony: A pastor (congregation #11) wrote: *"I heard the following about a very committed Iranian Christian from another city who is known to us: Among his Iranian Christian friends it was known and feared that by the Administrative Court of Lüneburg hardly a single Iranian Christian was recognized, whereas by the administrative court, which would be responsible for the hearings of the Iranian acquaintances from the Hanover area, virtually none was rejected."*

Congregations in Berlin (congregation #116): *"Some are still fighting after years for a better status in view of their identity card. Many fight to be allowed to work, but it is not approved when they ask the offices for permission to accept a certain job. The refusal is made without any credible justification! These people then unfortunately remain financially dependent on the German state, although they would prefer to care for the finances themselves. In one case an Iranian even had to abort his successfully started apprenticeship after eight months, was downgraded and continues to live under toleration with a red diagonal bar, although he previously had a residence permit. Some were taken to the airport early in the morning. By the time we heard about it, everything had already happened. Some of them were not deported because of serious health problems at the airport (emergency doctor, etc.). I only found out about one deported Afghani through his lawyer, who emailed me to say: 'I have to tell you the sad news that Mr. X was deported to Afghanistan this morning.' He would like to come back to Germany but has an entry ban of several years. We had baptized him shortly before his deportation. He writes to me often."*

7.5. Assessment of a conversion

A pastor from Hesse (congregation #15) wrote about conversion: *"There is also the hurdle for the pastor who baptizes that he can see that someone has started out in the faith, but they know nothing about the next steps."*

A congregation from North Rhine-Westphalia (#100) reported feigned conversions: *"Two Iranians accompanied by our congregation for some time stated during their questioning by the BAMF that they had converted to the Christian faith. Their account was assessed by the BAMF as not credible. Both were unable to show a faith affidavit from a church, were not baptized and did not attend church. They have been granted a temporary hold on deportation. The two filed an objection, which was rejected by the administrative court, since both had already been in Germany for more than a year and had not yet joined a church, been baptized or otherwise been able to prove a Christian lifestyle. As a result, one of the two refugees decided to attend a Persian church. He completed a faith course there and was baptized. He submitted a corresponding certificate to the administrative court. His request was rejected a second time because his action as a whole did not appear to be based on inner conviction but as planned for the purpose of residence. The two were not deported to their home country. I have known both refugees quite well since 2016 and have talked to them often. I share the assessment of the BAMF and the court, cannot see a credible and honest turn to the Christian faith."*

How congregations themselves assess to the authenticity of conversions is shown by congregation #33 from North Rhine-Westphalia: *"We had heard about how smugglers had taught refugees what they had to 'testify' and that they should attend church services to get a faith affidavit. They were also instructed to have their baptism based on their 'testimony'. With this knowledge in mind, we questioned our 20 candidates very closely about details of their faith and testimony. As a result, we could not baptize anyone in good conscience, and we did not issue any affidavits. Instead, we conducted a basic faith course with them, which lasted about half a year. Of all people, the ones who cried out the loudest for baptism and affidavits dropped out of the course and left the church. I cannot see into the hearts of these people, but if they had been interested in the faith, they would have stayed. But because their sole motivation was to follow the instructions of the smugglers, they went in search of an easier way to get their affidavit. The rest came to faith during the course. We asked each one if he understood everything and if he believed and accepted it that way. So, they were baptized and then (!) they got three affidavits at once: Baptismal affidavit, affidavit of successful participation in the course and the affidavit of attendance at church services. We prepared everyone for the trial and how to tell the judge of their inner convictions. Not that he goes to church regularly, but why he goes to church regularly and what this means to him. I went to many hearings at the administrative court in Minden, but I only had to testify as a witness for those who were so afraid of deportation that they could not think clearly. About the others the judges said that they had never experienced such refugees in the trial who could justify and defend their beliefs so well. Therefore, there was no need for further testimony on my part. We have started an international home group with our refugees. They invite other refugees to join, and we are already planning the next basic faith course."*

This report points out a circumstance that is a major hurdle for many refugees. Through experiences in their home country, they are suspicious of the authorities and are quite afraid of the hearing. Therefore, they want to obtain supporting documents as soon as possible which they believe will favor the outcome of their hearing. This stress and the fear of authorities and deportation cannot always be understood by German caregivers.

The various Christian denominations have different theological understandings and behaviors. Employees of the BAMF and the administrative courts should be familiar with this and take it into account accordingly when assessing conversions.

Congregation #11 from Lower Saxony: *"We have an extended family from Iran in our parish. They came to us when they were transferred from the reception camp in City A to City B. They come to the church automatically and add to the life of the church, including faithfully attending worship services. They enjoy a good reputation in the congregation. I have documented their faithfulness several times and issued certificates. At the hearing, due to their appeal of the BAMF decision at the administrative court in Lüneburg, they were all rejected except for one daughter who could show an internet blog as evidence. The judge objected that our church members could convincingly present their faith. I find that presumptuous. I also find my ministry [as a pastor] questioned, since these church members are more faithful and believing than many other members of the church. They have all been denied their faith by the state. Traditionally, in the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church, one is very critical of a faith that is oriented toward works. In this respect, it was only logical that they made special reference to grace and baptism. This in turn was depreciated by the judge."*

The hearings at the BAMF and the administrative courts also place demands on host churches. A Bavarian (congregation #18) commented: *"I notice how important it is to prepare convinced Christians for a hearing, not so much that they say the right thing, but so that they do remain authentic in their faith with its ups and downs"*.

7.6. Complications due to the COVID-19 pandemic

A special problem situation also for refugee converts arose from the occurrence of the Covid 19 pandemic. A congregation (#67) from Lower Saxony reported, *"Especially in pandemic times, less information about court decisions reaches us. Many migrants don't like to talk about their status."*

An observation from Berlin (local Evangelical Alliance #109) raises questions: *"I discovered that the Federal Office [BAMF] sends letters with 6, 8 or 10 questions, but the questionnaire is not up to date, so we can only refer to times before Corona. Questions such as: Do you continue to attend services regularly? How often do you attend services or other church events? How can such and similar questions be answered when the place of worship has been closed due to Corona for a year now?"*

7.7. Deportation of rejected converts

The deportation of rejected converts to their country of origin is particularly tragic. *"An Afghani parishioner who moved to our city after being rejected by the administrative court and who was educated and baptized here, was picked up in a morning police raid after being ordered to leave the country and put on the street in Kabul without identification. His family was living in Iran at the time, from whence he fled with our financial help. His family disowned him because he had become a Christian. He then went back to Kabul. Our church supported him financially with the apartment rent, so that he kept a high interest in contact with us. This contact broke off from one day to the next. Various attempts to reach him through friends were also unsuccessful, so one must assume that something bad happened to him."* (Pastor of congregation #37 in Brandenburg)

"A converted Christian who had been living in our city for about seven years and had been baptized outside our congregation was rejected by the Administrative Court of Bayreuth. He allowed himself to be tricked by the Central Foreigners Authority in Bayreuth into returning to Iran 'voluntarily'. This resulted in a brutal seven-month detention. Every Wednesday the prisoners were told how many of them would be executed that day, sometimes three, sometimes five. He – thank God – was not among them." (Congregation #36 from Bavaria)

7.8. Conclusion

Refugee converts and the congregations looking after them had positive experiences with the BAMF and the administrative courts primarily in the South and West of Germany (Hesse and Bavaria). Less positive to strongly negative reports came from congregations in the North and the East. From Schleswig-Holstein and Berlin, for example, many negative experiences with state authorities were reported.

The wide range of positive and negative impressions shows that there is a lack of objective standards of review among state agencies concerning the asylum applications of converts. There is an urgent need for improvement in this and in other areas.

8. Assessment of the credibility of converts by ecclesiastical and state actors

The direct comparison of written verdicts from the authorities and faith affidavits from church congregations or statements by converts and pastors clearly show the disparate assessment of the converts' credibility. The following two cases brought to the attention of Open Doors during the study serve as examples.

The quoted and condensed text excerpts have not been grammatically revised. The personal and geographical data have been shortened or modified in a way that the anonymity of the person is preserved.

Particularly noteworthy in the following texts from case 1 (Said) are the excerpts from the transcript of the Bavarian Administrative Court XY, in which the phrase "At the court's request" is used several times when Said is questioned about his Christian faith.

8.1. The case of Said

(Name changed for security reasons /
Open Doors has the real name)

Said was born in Iran in the mid-1980s. By birth he is a Muslim and says he converted to Christianity in Germany.

According to the **BAMF decision** of the summer of 2017, Said's asylum claim was processed in Bavaria. His application for asylum was rejected and he was not granted subsidiary protection. As there is no deportation stop for Iran, Said was ordered to leave the Federal Republic of Germany within 30 days of announcement of the decision. In addition, he was forbidden re-entry and residence in Germany for 30 months from the date of deportation.

An excerpt of the BAMF verdict:

"The personal interview at the Federal Office took place on [...]. The applicant essentially stated that he had been persecuted in Iran by his wife's family. The applicant and his wife had been accused of bringing shame on the family. The applicant's father-in-law and brother-in-law had beaten up the applicant in the street. The wife had been mentally ill and had committed suicide by self-immolation and the applicant and their common child had been injured in the fire. The father-in-law and brother-in-law had abused the applicant and threatened to attack him with acid.

Furthermore, the applicant submitted a letter from the Evangelical Free Christian congregation in [...] dated [...], which was to prove that the applicant had converted to the Christian faith. The Federal Office is also in possession of a baptismal certificate stating that the applicant was baptized on [...] in the Evangelical Free Church congregation in [...].

The applicant did not present any concerns worthy of protection. [...]

The acts of persecution by his father-in-law and brother-in-law in Iran alleged by the applicant do not meet the requirements of § 3 of the Asylum Act (= AsylG) with regard to actors from whom persecution may emanate. In the applicant's case, there is no persecution by the State, by parties or organizations controlling the State or a substantial part of the State's territory, or by non-State actors where the State is unable or unwilling to provide protection from persecution. A linkage of the alleged acts of persecution to the grounds of persecution defined under § 3b AsylG race, religion, nationality, social groups or political opinion is not presented. The motives for action are of a private nature, it is about the 'honor' of the applicant's wife's family.

Therefore, it should first be noted that the applicant left Iran untraced.

Insofar as the applicant refers to his turning away from Islam to Christianity [emphasis added by Open Doors], he cannot substantiate his asylum claim on post-facto flight reason. To determine if an applicant might face religious persecution, a careful examination of the inner, religious-personality motivations for such a change of faith is required. It must be possible to ascertain that acceptance of the adopted religion is based on a firm conviction and a serious change of religious attitude and not an opportunistic one. The conversion ought also be demonstrated in the shaping of a new religious identity of the person seeking protection [...].

In the present case, the motives for turning away from Islam to Christianity were not convincingly explained. When asked about his Christian faith, he stated that he found 'the answer' there. Every time he reads the Bible, he realizes that Christianity is a religion of love and forgiveness, of mercy and without bloodshed. [Since] he has been studying Christianity, he has found peace. He had not hated Islam, but he had been disappointed by it and was therefore 'irreligious'.

This is not very convincing. A person who claims not to have been religious, but now claims to have found his salvation in a 'new' religion, ought to have a rudimentary explanation of his inner motives. Instead, the circumstances of how he claims to have found Christianity here in Germany indicate that the applicant's alleged activities in the church are primarily aimed at obtaining a right to stay in Germany.

He was, for example, approached by two Iranians about Christianity in his refugee accommodation. Additionally, a Dr. Max from Regensburg had come again and again, and shuttled people to a church in a van. This had aroused his interest. Iranian asylum seekers know through contacts with compatriots that a conversion to Christianity can result in the granting of refugee status. This is why they act accordingly and in almost all asylum proceedings of Iranian citizens an alleged conversion to Christianity is presented. With this knowledge, the rather rudimentary knowledge of Christian contents is not convincing of a serious inner change of conviction on the part of the applicant. It is therefore also not to be expected that the applicant

would describe himself to others in Iran as a Christian or attend Christian events privately or publicly.

Nor is the [...] baptism carried out sufficient for a positive verdict. For solely on the basis of a formal conversion to Christianity, the applicant does not have to fear persecution if he returns to Iran. It is also known to the Iranian authorities that Iranian citizens repeatedly convert to the Christian faith in asylum proceedings because they hope that this will improve their chances. [...] The purely formal conversion has therefore no adverse consequences for the applicant in the event of a return to Iran [...]."

The following are **excerpts from the transcript of the Bavarian Administrative Court XY** on the administrative dispute of Said (plaintiff) against the Federal Republic of Germany regarding the enforcement of asylum law in Spring 2020.

"When asked by the court how it came about that the plaintiff turned to the Christian faith, the plaintiff stated that God determines everything. God says that he pre-ordains. He had not known Jesus Christ in Iran.

When asked by the court how the plaintiff had come into contact with Christianity in Germany, he explained that he had had to suffer a lot in his life and had always had the feeling of being very alone. In Germany he also felt alone. There were two people in his accommodation who were Christians. They had tried to talk to him. They asked him why he was always so sad and did not talk to anyone. They also asked about his burns and then gave him the Good News about Jesus Christ and told him to watch movies about Jesus Christ. The Jesus Christ he saw in the movies was a God who came to earth and went to the cross because of sins. The God he had known in Iran demanded one go on jihad. Islamic retribution according to the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It was an angry God who demanded that one pray four or five times a day.

The plaintiff further stated that he was very interested after seeing the movie. The two Christians had then procured more movies of Jesus Christ for him. It was the differences between the religions that had brought the truth to light. Jesus Christ came for peace. Jesus teaches us to turn the other cheek when we receive a slap in the face. Islam is not like that. In Christianity, it is also important to share your faith, but not with coercion. If the other person would not agree, he would not experience the grace of God. In Islam it is demanded that one fights for God and Mohammed and kills if someone does not come to Islam.

When asked by the court what the plaintiff considered to be the essential content of the Christian faith, the plaintiff stated that it was love. God is love. Through love, one could forgive and help others. One could put the needs of others above one's own needs. Jesus Christ brought love. There is no such thing elsewhere [emphasis added by Open Doors].

When asked by the court how this affected the plaintiff personally, the plaintiff stated that he had seen the love of Jesus Christ, the truth and the changes in himself. He had changed on the inside. Sadness had been replaced with joy, hatred with forgiveness, and darkness had been replaced with light. Before he had

not been able to forgive what had been done to him. Now, he said, faith is deeply rooted in him. He has now been able to forgive the people of Iran.

In response to a question from the court as to how the plaintiff, in light of his testimony, reconciles with the fact that he left his wife and daughter behind in Iran, he explained that he had had to come. There had been no other way. He prayed and repented. He prays that God will forgive him and help his daughter. God's help, he said, was also better than his own help. [...]

When asked by the court what the baptism meant to the plaintiff, he stated that he could not put into words the feeling he had at the baptism. He said it was like someone who had been blind for 30 years and could see again after an operation. He opened his eyes and saw the truth. All his sins were forgiven. He had put his sins in the water. Before he could no longer walk because of his sins. Now he is happy and joyful, he can pray, and he can pray for others because Jesus Christ has given him a new life.

When asked by the court about his baptismal verse and what it meant for his life, the plaintiff explained that his baptismal verse was, 'I will show you the way you should go and guide you'. This, he said, meant that God had willed that he should go the present way. God had brought him here and was looking after him. God had saved him from the people in Iran who had meant him harm, he said. When asked by the court how the plaintiff's faith affected his daily life, he explained that he could do anything with faith. He prayed for everything he needed to do. With faith and prayer, he said, everything could be put in order. He discusses the Word of God with other believers and lives his life according to God's rules.

The plaintiff adds, after retranslation, that the court did not include in the record that he also mentioned that Jesus Christ said that one can move mountains with faith.

When asked by the court what the most important rule of the Christian faith was for the plaintiff, he stated that it was to love God and others with all one's soul and to show charity.

When asked by the court if the plaintiff knew the basic rules of the Christian faith, he stated repentance, faith, new life, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When asked by the court whether the term 'Ten Commandments' means anything to the plaintiff, the plaintiff stated that yes, he knew them.

When further questioned by the court as to how these commandments came to be, the plaintiff stated that God gave the Ten Commandments to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai through Moses."

The following are excerpts from the **judgment of the Bavarian Administrative Court XY**.

Said's application was dismissed, he was ordered to pay the legal fees, a decision that is provisionally enforceable.

"At his hearing by the Federal Office [...], the applicant submitted in support of his application for asylum that he was being persecuted in Iran by his wife's family because they had been against the marriage. The father was a high-ranking member of the secret service and could find him anywhere. In addition, he had converted to Christianity in Germany. [...]"

As justification, the decision states that the acts of persecution described by the plaintiff are of a private nature and do not meet the requirements of § 3 AsylG. Nor was it convincing that the plaintiff had converted to the Christian faith with serious, identity-shaping conviction of indispensable significance.. [...]"

Reasons for decision

[...] The Federal Office has rightly rejected the asylum application in its entirety. The court first follows the grounds of the contested decision and in this respect refrains from a further presentation of the reasons for the decision (cf. § 77 section 2 Asylum Act). In addition, the following is to be stated: [...]"

A claim of the plaintiff can't be the consequence of the plaintiff's conversion to the Christian faith. The court is not convinced that the alleged conversion of the plaintiff to Christianity is based on a serious inner conviction of faith, i.e. that there is a turn to the Christian faith that shapes the religious identity of the plaintiff. It must first be established, according to the precedent of the deciding chamber, that there is no prejudicial effect of the formal baptism.[...]"

The decisive factor for the court is the picture of the plaintiff's personality and his asserted conviction of faith that was gained during the detailed questioning of the hearing. On this basis, the court is not convinced that the plaintiff's inner conviction would shape his life according to the Christian faith in such a way that, would lead to persecution as a former Muslim were he to be deported.

In an overall assessment of the impression that the judge was able to gain from the protocol of the plaintiff's hearing before the BAMF, the statements made in the court, the detailed questioning of the plaintiff in the oral hearing, the plaintiff's reason for leaving Iran, the plaintiff's path to Christianity and his motives in this regard, the plaintiff's previous way of life, and of the internalization of his faith, the Court is not sufficiently convinced that Christianity determines and shapes his identity and his personality to such an extent that, in the event of his return to Iran, he would suffer a serious distress of conscience that contradicts fundamental human rights and freedoms if he had to conceal his conversion there in order to avoid persecution or endangerment.

The prerequisite for the granting of such protection is that the exercise of religion be based on a serious inner conviction of faith. This means that there is a commitment to a particular faith that shapes the religious identity of the person inasmuch that the particular person, after returning to their home country, feels that religious practice (such as attending religious services, fellowship with other believers or sharing their faith with others) is indispensable for the preservation of their religious identity, thereby exposing them to persecution. Whether this is the issue can only be decided on a case-by-case basis.

*Admittedly, the court does not deny that the plaintiff, [as] he claims, regularly attends worship services and is active in church life, for example in cleaning up and washing dishes. **Furthermore, the plaintiff's testimony evidenced a profound knowledge of the Bible, whereas central tenets of the faith, such as those of the basic tenets of the Christian faith, seemed rather foreign** [emphasis added by Open Doors]."*

Note from Open Doors: The transcript of the Bavarian Administrative Court reads: "When asked by the court if the plaintiff knew the basic rules of the Christian faith, he stated: 'Repentance, faith, new life and resurrection of Jesus Christ.' When asked by the court whether the term Ten Commandments means anything to the plaintiff, the plaintiff stated that 'yes, he knew them.' When further questioned by the court as to how these commandments came to be, the plaintiff stated that God gave the Ten Commandments to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai through Moses"

"Admittedly, he knew the concept of the Ten Commandments and could roughly recite their origin. However, when asked by the court about the content of these basic rules, the plaintiff stated that this was "repentance, faith, new life and resurrection of Jesus Christ" (p. 12 of the transcript). For the judge, the impression arose during the hearing that individual contents of the Christian faith and the Bible had been learned in preparation for questioning by the court and reproduced in the oral hearing.

Moreover, the judge lacked the impression from the plaintiff's statements that he "spoke from the heart," with a genuine understanding of what he communicated about his faith, and that his new faith would cause a conflict of conscience if he could no longer live this faith freely under the pressure of a possible persecution as a former Muslim. The judge is convinced that this impression did not stem from the undeniable difficulty of communicating the significance of one's own faith in conversation. Rather, an overall view of the hearing gives the impression that there is no serious internalization of the Christian faith to speak of. The court has the impression that the primary motivation of the plaintiff [in conversion] is fellowship with others and the resulting integration.

In an overall assessment of the plaintiff's testimony protocolled at the BAMF and court hearing, the court is not convinced of the plaintiff's sincere commitment to the Christian faith [emphasis added by Open Doors].

Without a serious conversion to Christianity, to shape the religious identity of the plaintiff, and without a recognizable inner conviction of faith, the judge is convinced that there is no danger of persecution by the Iranian state on account of 'apostasy from the Islamic faith' [...]."

8.2. The case of Maria

(Name changed for security reasons /
Open Doors has the real name)

Maria is a Christian convert from Iran. She entered Germany in 2018 on a short-stay visa via a third country and applied for asylum. According to her own statements, she became interested in the Christian faith in Iran after two of her brothers turned away from Islam and became Christians. Because the home group that both brothers attended had been exposed, the two had fled Iran.

In Iran, Maria's car was towed (Open Doors: by the police) with a Bible inside. That same evening, her apartment was ransacked by the authorities when Maria was not at home. Her mother-in-law informed her of this. Her husband also informed her that the Ettelaat (secret service) was looking for her and urged her to seek safety immediately. Maria then went into hiding with the aim of leaving the country. A smuggler got her a visa, the date of issue was backdated a few weeks before her actual departure. However, she ignored this. The visa was valid, and she was able to flee Iran.

After the rejection of her asylum application – as is the case with most Iranians – she appealed the decision at the administrative court in City A. Maria stated that she had not practiced the Christian faith in Iran and had had no contact with local Christians because this is a punishable offence. She had only informed herself about the Christian faith through contact with her brothers abroad and had also received a Persian Bible from them.

Maria sought out and came in contact with a Christian church after her arrival in Germany. After relocation to another city, she again sought contact to a church in her area. Two congregations have attested to her active participation in church services, congregational life including attendance at three home groups each week (one each in Persian, English and German).

The AC in City B states in its verdict that leaving Islam is forbidden in Iran and is punishable by jail time or even death. It is also noted that the charge brought against converts is often not apostasy (turning away from Islam), but "endangering national security," and are subject to arbitrary arrests and harassment.

Although Maria reported that her house had been searched and the court recognizes that converts already on the radar of the Iranian authorities are particularly at risk, the court did not consider this a threat because Maria had 'fabricated' the whole story.

From the administrative courts verdict – grounds for the judgement:

P.16, p. 2: "Measured against this, the applicant is not entitled for a refugee status. The judge is not convinced that the applicant's story of flight or conversion is true (see (a)). Nor is the judge convinced that the applicant would have to suppress a religious practice of her faith in Iran, which she considers obligatory to preserve her religious identity, in order to avoid relevant attacks by third parties or state actors (b)). Nor is there a substantial likelihood that she will face persecution on account of the ascribed religious affiliation (c)).

a) The judge is not convinced that the story of the escape or conversion presented by the plaintiff corresponds to the truth. Her descriptions contradict the evidence,

and her testimony is unable to reconcile the discrepancies. aa) The chronological details cannot be reconciled with the date of issue of her visa."

Note from Open Doors: Maria had told the AC when she had ordered the visa from the smuggler. The visa then bore an issue date that was backdated by approximately three weeks. Maria was unable to resolve this contradiction. The judge used this as the most important evidence (see above: objective evidence) that Maria's testimony was fabricated. This discrepancy together with Maria's incredible conversion served as the basis for rejecting her asylum claim.

The possibility that the visa could have been reused, or a fictitious date, a typo (both dates are in the same Persian month and differ only by the absence of a digit), or whether this missing digit could merely be faintly printed and poorly visible, were not considered by the judge. The entire chain of reasoning of disbelief and thus rejection is based on the absence of this one digit in her visa.

From the ACs judgment

P. 17 f.: "The plaintiff has also made incomprehensible statements about her religious duties. On the one hand, she has said that missionary work would be part of the Christian faith if she returned. On the other hand, due to the dangerous nature of her conversion, she claims to have had no contact with Christians until she left Iran and to have talked to no one about Christianity. [...]"

The written assessments of the plaintiff's faith and religious life that were submitted [Open Doors' comment: baptismal certificate as well as confirmation of participation in baptismal instruction, affidavits from two congregations that Maria regularly participates in church services and in three home groups – in Persian, English, German – every week] may be indications of the plaintiff's religious character, but they do not excuse the judge from forming their own picture of the plaintiff's religious identity. As related, the judge was unconvinced based on the personal impression of the plaintiff at the hearing, that the plaintiff had experienced a relevant religious impression during her time in Germany.

*c) The plaintiff is not threatened with considerable probability of persecution on account of ascribed religious affiliation. According to this knowledge, she is not threatened with persecution in Iran. **Even if acquaintances or family members should have learned of her baptism abroad, no considerable probability of persecution is to be expected if the plaintiff – as is to be expected – does not engage in any activities related to Christianity after her return** [emphasis by Open Doors]. *That she had already been targeted by the Iranian authorities is implausible.**

II. The applicant is also not entitled to be granted subsidiary protection because she has not put forward any valid reasons for believing that she is threatened with serious harm in her country of origin, § 4 section 1 of the AsylG."

Note from Open Doors: The judge doubted (with reference to a state report by the Federal Office of 04/01/2019, according to which there had been no arrest in a repatriation of converts for 10 years) the endangerment of Maria and the likelihood of persecution if she – as is to be expected – does not carry out any activities connected with Christianity after her return.

However, to expect her to keep her faith hidden or to feel compelled to keep it hidden is contrary to the general human rights and values of the EU and the Asylum Act. Moreover, the tightening of Article 499 of the Iranian penal code is not considered.

9. Understanding conversion

Religious faith is synonymous with a person's innermost convictions and is inseparable from the central questions of human existence, such as:

"Who am I?"; "Where did I come from and where am I going after this life?";
 "Who is God?"; "How do I get in touch with God?" and "Am I accepted by God?"

A change of faith cannot be equated with a change of religion, which can be carried out externally without inner conviction or significant effect on the inner life.

Conversion from a biblical perspective

There are many studies concerning change of faith, stretching from those of sociological and psychological perspectives to those of religious and cultural anthropology. This segment is concerned with conversion from a biblical perspective, because it is about turning to the God that Christians worship – whom Jesus addressed as "Father in heaven".

Because it is a conversion to the God of the Bible, the Bible serves as the foundation for observation. The following are examples from the New Testament Book of Acts, written at the time of the formation of the first Christian church. The Bible does not speak of a conversion, but of repentance. Repentance is the reaction of a person to an action of God, which can be very different (sermon, dream, conversation, inspiration, reading, movie, etc.). First, there is a "new view, idea, or realization." This is followed by a personal decision to pursue the new thought. Conversion involves two actions:

- 1) Repentance = (conversion) away from old thinking to new thinking (behavior follows afterwards)
- 2) Faith = deep trust THAT Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and is the Savior of mankind sent by God / and faith IN Jesus (you are my God and Lord).

An important event in which people turned to faith in Jesus Christ after his resurrection is described in Acts 2:37–38: *"But when they [the inhabitants of Jerusalem] heard this, it went through their hearts, and they said to Peter and the other apostles: Men, brethren, what shall we do? Peter said unto them: Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."*²⁹ The sermon gave knowledge of God and led to a decision.

One consequence of conversion is life with/in a new community. Acts 2:41–42: *"They therefore which received his word were baptized: and that day were added about three thousand men. But they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, and in fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."* This all happened in one day (!): they had become Christians.

²⁹ Bible quotations follow the English King James Version.

Biblical faith, according to Hebrews 11:1, is *"a firm assurance of things hoped for, and a not doubting of things not seen."* This is something completely different than human or natural faith, which is more like a presumption of what is true.

This firm certainty arises in different ways. A personal experience of God can lead directly to this firm certainty, without knowledge about the contents of faith being necessary. The experiencing of God in itself creates certainty – it is grasped as reality.

Other spiritual and cognitive/intellectual as well as emotional elements can contribute to an (identity-forming) affirmation (see Acts 2:41–42 above):

- >> Spiritual elements: further experiences of God (e.g. knowledge of sin, forgiveness, peace with God, experiencing God's Spirit) as well as spiritual discernment of who God is through fellowship with other Christians and reading the Bible, etc.
- >> Cognitive / intellectual elements: study of biblical texts and understanding contexts and backgrounds (e.g. how does God deal with man / what does the practical life as a Christian look like: marriage, family, community, etc.).
- >> Emotional elements: experiencing security and a sense of acceptance with God and within the community of Christians / experiencing being fulfilled in the community with God (e.g. meaning of life).

There are numerous studies on the subject of conversion of Muslims to the Christian faith (e.g. Reinhold Strähler: "Conversion from Islam to Christianity in Sudan," UNISA 2009; Reinhold Strähler: „Einfach und komplex zugleich – Konversionsprozesse und ihre Beurteilung“, Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2021). In a study conducted by Fuller Theological Seminary with 750 converts from Muslim backgrounds, the converts were asked why they had chosen to follow Christ; what had led them to this decision. The participants came from 30 countries and 50 ethnic groups, representing every major region of the Islamic world. In the evaluation, entitled "Why Muslims follow Jesus," the converts interviewed listed the influences that had led them to choose Jesus Christ and ranked them in order of importance.

- 1) The convincing lifestyle of Christians.
- 2) Experiencing God's power in the form of answered prayers and experienced healing.
- 3) The dissatisfaction with Islam they had experienced.
- 4) Supernatural experiences through dreams and visions before their decision for Christ (27 %). At the time of the actual decision (40 %), in the time after (45 %).
- 5) The Gospel message, especially assurance of salvation and forgiveness.
- 6) The spiritual truth contained in the Bible, in the Old and New Testaments. Although Muslims are often taught that "the Torah, Psalms and Gospel" were falsified, they found these texts convincing when they read them.

- 7) The Bible's teaching about the love of God. According to the Quran, Allah loves those who love him back. The Bible emphasizes that God's love is for all people.
- 8) The love that is evident through the life and teachings of Jesus.

Approach to the Christian faith – Conversion

Every conversion is unique. Both the way to it as well as the underlying motives and the actual experience of the change. For the step towards the actual conversion some need hours, others several years.

Conversion can be caused by:

- 1) **An influence from the outside** – an encounter, a conversation, a dream, a book or film, an event, a sermon. A new thought awakens the curiosity to learn more.
- 2) **An initiative from within** – unanswered questions, disappointment with previous religion, active search for God, truth and the meaning of life. This can be linked to the study of a religion: what does it say about God and about the meaning of life? How does it explain life and the world?

In both cases there are spiritual as well as cognitive/intellectual and emotional elements.

To 1): A dream or conversation with a Christian can lead to a new knowledge of God. It is possible that initially one has little to no knowledge about the new faith. A sudden realization can come through an encounter or through a book (which was not sought). Further conversations and encounters lead to a decision, "I want to become a Christian (believe in Jesus)."

The book of Acts 8:26–38 (single person) as well as 10:1–48 (group of people) describes two such incidents. In both cases religious knowledge of Judaism was present, though the persons involved were not Jews. In a conversation or sermon, the gospel of Jesus Christ was proclaimed. All those present decided to believe in Jesus and they were immediately baptized (so they were Christians already after a short meeting and the impartation of a few beliefs).

To 2): One's own initiative to seek and experience God in new ways can have many causes and can extend over different periods of time (days to years). But by this way one can come to a knowledge of God (see Acts 8,27f.).

The decisive factor in the BAMF's determination of whether a conversion has taken place ought not be primarily based on religious knowledge (about the Bible, Christian holidays, important contents of faith). The convert may possess such knowledge, but it is acquired over time.

The decisive factor is: Has a life changing conversion (repentance) taken place and is the faith in Jesus known?

Repentance = What I thought before was wrong. I cannot stand before God with my behavior. For example, Jesus is not just a prophet, but the Messiah of God, his son, and God himself. For a Muslim this is a radical change of thinking.

Faith = trust: I have a firm assurance that Jesus rose from the dead and has the place of honor with God (i.e., is God's Son). The confession of faith in Jesus Christ is crucial according to the Bible (cf. Romans 10:9–10).

Romans 10:9–10, *"For if thou shalt confess with thy mouth that Jesus is Lord, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For if you believe with your heart, you will be justified; and if you confess with your mouth, you will be saved."*

All examples of the first Christian church (see Acts) demonstrate that people (from other religions) were baptized on their confession and then became members of the church. They were seen as Christians. The life change came afterwards and remained a lifelong process.

The religious knowledge of the (new) Christians who were accepted into the church was rather limited (see Acts 2,41: *"that day there were added about three thousand people / Acts 2,47: "but the Lord added to the church daily" / Acts 4,4: "But many of those who had heard the word believed; and the number of the people increased to about five thousand"*).

The church leaders saw no reason to doubt or review these "faith decisions" before the new Christians were accepted into the church, even when they were converted from another religion (Acts 10:47).

The most famous example is that of Saul, later called Paul. We read about his conversion in Acts, chapter 9. Just a few days after Jesus appeared to him on the way to Damascus, a Christian named Hananias (who knew that Saul was a persecutor of Christians) comes to him: *"Dear brother Saul, the Lord has sent me, Jesus, who appeared to you on the way here"* (Acts 9:17). Paul was subsequently baptized.

Conversion for asylum tactical reasons? Absolutely not!

According to reports from several NGOs working in Iran, several hundred thousand Muslims have converted to the Christian faith there in recent years. They have done this though knowledge of their conversion brings them immense social and economic disadvantages and even harassment and criminal prosecution by the government. They are subject to harsh persecution by their family, the Muslim religious community, their employer, and even the secret police.

There must be weighty reasons that people choose to believe in Jesus Christ despite these known deterrents. Asylum tactical reasons are not applicable, they live in Iran.

For converts, the spiritual gain is so great that they are willing to pay a very high price for it (arrest; dispossession; loss of family, friends, reputation, work; torture; long prison sentences; even death).

Their conversion points to a personal decision, which concerns the inner man, and which is made in the heart – in the center of the deepest convictions.

If several hundred thousand people in Iran have turned to the Christian faith in recent years – despite the dangers – it is very questionable whether the majority of converts from Iran who apply for asylum protection in Germany are doing so for dishonest motives and are only feigning a conversion (for asylum tactical reasons).

It is indisputable that there are also some feigned changes of faith; this is confirmed by pastors and priests of all churches.

Examination on the part of the BAMF and administrative courts as to whether a conversion is "identity-forming"

The personal turning to and confessing Jesus Christ as Lord is the conversion itself (Joh. 1,12: *"But as many as received Him [Jesus], to them He gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in His name"*); it cannot be reduced to a change of behavior.

With this confession, a change of identity (becoming a child of God through faith) has already taken place. However, the extent of this change varies. The new faith is identity-forming, but at the time of the interview by the BAMF / the ACs, converts will have internalized their new identity to varying degrees.

The effects of the conversion become visible over a longer period. This depends, among other things, on

- >> the intensity of engagement with questions of faith and instruction therein before and after conversion;
- >> the content of the teaching (what is taught – this differs depending on the church);
- >> the intensity of fellowship with other Christians (strongly variable due to persecution in the environment/family, access to a church);
- >> intellectual and emotional conditions (e.g. education, traumatic experiences, psychological stress, personal maturity, etc.);
- >> personal conditioning through family and other influences (how to deal with conflicts, how to live relationships, etc.). The imparted values can be in strong conflict with the new faith. The convert is not bound by his conversion to an automatic behavior but can freely decide against what they recognize as good and right. Should they then do so, this in itself is not evidence that his conversion was not genuine or sincere. Their future behavior will be shaped over years by the Bible and God's work.

The examination of the BAMF (and also of the ACs) as to whether conversion is identity-forming is mostly aimed at knowledge and behavior. The decisive question, however, must be: "Have you become a Christian/ believer in Jesus Christ?" If this question is answered with "Yes!", this is to be recognized.

The individual's idea of what it means to be a Christian, i.e. a follower of Jesus, will vary and develop over the years, because the Christian life is a journey of continual change. In the beginning, the convert may emphasize "Jesus healed me of an illness," "He appeared to me in a dream and called me to Himself," "My sins are forgiven," or "I have found peace with God," or "Now I know I will spend eternity with God." Later, they may emphasize "God has healed my marriage," or "my life is following a completely new direction – I can forgive people who have done evil to me," or "I want to serve Jesus".

Foremost the confession: "YES, I have become a follower of Jesus," is valid. This is an objective criterion. The biblical evidence that someone believes in the God of the Bible is consistent. Jesus says: *"Whoever therefore confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my heavenly Father"* (Matthew 10:32).

A second objective criterion is membership in the fellowship of Christians. If this exists and is also confirmed by the church, this is to be recognized. Here certificates from the church community, how the convert participates in the community life (at church services and more) play a supporting role.

Examination by BAMF and administrative courts as to whether the conversion is "relevant to persecution"

The convert's description of how they understand their new identity follows primarily subjective criteria. They experience and describe their conversion personally. Humanly speaking, it is not possible for them to predict how they will behave in a situation of persecution. As a general rule, the convert is not yet firmly established in their new faith, even if they know the contents of their faith.

Depending on their personality, they can be very confident or very uncertain in their assessment of how they will react to persecution – depending on how much torture or trauma they have already experienced. A confident or uncertain assessment may be accurate or not. The prognosis of personal behavior is not practically feasible.

A third objective criterion is the persecution situation in the country of origin:

- a) Is a conversion possible there at all?
- b) Can leaving Islam be sanctioned by the government?
- c) Is there evidence of persecution and discrimination against converts in the country?
- d) Does persecution of converts because of their faith occur through the judiciary, police authorities, unofficial bodies, militant groups, relatives, social exclusion, discrimination in the workplace, etc.?

- e) What kinds of persecution are to be expected?
- f) Are these violations of international human rights and possibly also of treaties to which the country is a signatory?
- g) The severity and frequency of the violations must be considered. Even with only relatively few violations, the ever present danger for every convert must be considered, as it could affect them at any time.

Varying degrees of willingness to share the new faith

Depending on the theological character and faith practice of a church community in Germany, the convert will get to know different models of practiced faith life. This concerns the private life of faith as well as the public one including evangelism as well as the celebration of church services and the participation in prayer meetings and other events (home groups, small groups, basic faith courses etc.). In addition, the need for participation in courses and seminars will also vary, being dependent on their schedule. One church may be reluctant to engage in evangelism, while another is strongly focused on bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all people. For one church, teaching events are necessary to promote the spiritual growth of individual Christians, while others offer only sporadic lectures on various topics.

The spiritual form of the congregation at the beginning of the new life of faith shapes the convert's understanding and life of faith, even though this may be further developed later, for example, in encounters with other Christian faith groups or also through the study of the Bible.

Even within one denomination there are different forms of faith life and thus of the values of the parishioners. It is therefore not possible to make a blanket assessment regarding the future life of faith (in the case of deportation to the country of origin). In addition to being shaped by his church congregation, a convert can also be influenced at the same time by contact with Christians from other groups.

In summary, a specific behavior is more likely for one group, but it cannot necessarily be attributed across the board to all members of the same group.

Situation of traditional and converted Christians in Iran (see also chapter 6.1.)

The Christian faith in Iran is seen as a dangerous "Western" influence, and is therefore politicized. Very active Christians are at higher risk to be discovered and arrested and, in case of repeated arrests, sentenced to long prison terms. Subsequently, Christians of all stripes are regarded as followers of a false faith and agents of the "West," making them de facto opponents of the regime.

Authorities in Germany should not expect new Christians to live their faith in Iran in such a discreet way that they remain "undetected". The mission associated with the Christian faith is not defined by a specific denomination, but by Christ himself:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations: baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Even if not all Christian communities understand and implement this commission in the same way, this mission has an influence on the understanding of faith and congregational life.

Reports from several Christian NGOs active in Iran confirm that even members of traditional churches in Iran expose themselves to the risk of persecution by the authorities if they pursue this mission in whatever form and intensity. The same is even more true for converts.

Whether they have already personally experienced persecution or are "only" traumatized by the arrest of friends is not decisive. The serious risk that they could be persecuted (arrested, interrogated, tortured, property confiscated, sentenced to imprisonment, etc.) is a clear indication of their need for protection.

Threat to converts of possible imprisonment and death penalty

To this day, the major Islamic schools of law maintain the death penalty for those who publicly (recognizably) turn away from Islam. In their view, this is a betrayal of the Muslim community and an attack on the foundations of society and the state. In most countries with a majority Muslim population, conversion from Islam to another religion is either legally impossible or severely punished under Sharia law.

If the renunciation of Islam and the conversion to the Christian faith is forbidden and even prosecutable, all aspects of a converts religious conviction are sanctioned.

The religious identity of converts is fundamentally questioned.

- 1) Their fear of persecution is well-founded, regardless of how intensely persecution has already been experienced personally or in their immediate surroundings.**
- 2) The possibility and fear of discovery and persecution by the authorities is ever-present.**
- 3) Their religious identity is fundamentally in question. It is not possible to single out certain beliefs or faith practices which are more or less important. They are all relevant.**
- 4) The confession of Jesus Christ, the decisive characteristic of a Christian, is generally forbidden.**

10. The topic in the media – examples

For years, the media have been reporting on dubious rejections of converts by the BAMF and the administrative courts. In several cases, the formal application of legal guidelines brings immense suffering to people who have fled to Germany because of persecution in their home countries. This undermines the intention of the Asylum Act and that of the Constitution.

Example 1 from September 25th, 2020

Church leader threatened with deportation to Afghanistan³⁰

Hof (idea) – In Bavaria, a church leader of the Protestant St. Michael's parish in Hof is to be deported to Afghanistan. The asylum application of Naser R., a former Muslim who converted to Christianity, was finally rejected in July. The deportation announced by the Central Foreigners Authority in Bayreuth was "unbearable and incomprehensible," said the Dean of Hof, Günter Saalfrank, to the Protestant news agency Idea. In order to achieve a right to stay, Christians appealed to the Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder (CSU). In an open letter from the 21st of September to the professing Protestant, members of the Hof church council wrote that it must be possible to give Naser R. a future in Germany. Especially people who have chosen the Christian faith should not be deported to a country where there is no freedom of religion.

In Afghanistan, the 28-year-old had to fear "for life and limb." Because of his conversion to Christianity, he is threatened with the death penalty in the strict Muslim country. The mayor of Hof, Eva Döhla (SPD), also calls for solidarity with him. Like Naser R., she is in the church leadership of St. Michaelis. "I wish that he may keep the place he has found in our midst. Let us show solidarity," she wrote in a public statement. According to media reports, the Bavarian Bishop and EKD Council President Heinrich Bedford-Strohm (Munich) is "saddened" by the planned deportation. It must be stopped. He hopes that a solution will be found in talks with those presiding over the case.

Deportation to a country Naser doesn't know

Naser R. was born in Iran. His father was Afghan. In 2015, Mr. R. fled to Germany. A year later he was baptized in the Hof congregation. He has been a member of the extended church council since December 2018. Dean Saalfrank made it clear to Idea that the Christian faith was "identity-forming" for Naser R. He lives it in everyday life, is involved in the church and the YMCA Hof, and tells others about his faith.

³⁰ IDEA. Kirchenvorsteher droht Abschiebung nach Afghanistan.

On: <https://www.idea.de/menschenrechte/detail/kirchenvorsteher-droht-abschiebung-nach-afghanistan-114331.html>.

Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

"Naser is not someone who only pretends to be a Christian for asylum tactical reasons," Saalfrank said. Yet his confession of the triune God, his Christian commitment, nor the fact that because of his conversion his life would be in mortal danger in Afghanistan, were not recognized as grounds for asylum by the [BAMF] or Administrative Court of Bayreuth. According to the Dean, the legal proceedings surrounding his asylum application as well as the unsuccessful attempts to obtain a work permit have left psychological marks on Naser R. For this reason, he had already been treated on an in-patient basis for psychological problems. "The solidarity of other Christians, however, gives him courage and does him good," Saalfrank told Idea.

MOMA Reporter: Church leader facing deportation? – The strange case of Naser Rezai³¹ (12/23/2020)

Naser Rezai is a church leader at the Protestant city church in Hof. Five years ago he came to Germany as a refugee and was later baptized.

A few weeks ago, our MOMA reporter Uschi Schmidt visited him. The converted Christian was threatened with deportation to Afghanistan. On the one hand, he is supposed to get a work permit, but on the other he must leave the country – possibly to get a visa for re-entry via a German embassy abroad. Does all this sound strange? Our MOMA reporter thinks so too and travelled to Hof once again.

Example 2 from 06/172021

Nuremberg wants to deport married Christian woman to Iran³²

The Nuremberg Office for Foreigners wants to deport an Iranian woman married to a recognized refugee. The Refugee Council considers this illegal. The woman tried to commit suicide at the airport.

Example 3 from 06/242021

Barßelerin threatens deportation to Iran³³

The nursing assistant Zahra Sheybani is considered to be very well integrated. Her work colleagues and politicians are campaigning for her to be able to stay in Barßel. But the decision is out of their hands.

Iranian-born Zahra Sheybani has been living in Barßel for eight years. This is the center of her life, and for the past two years the trained nurse has had a permanent job as a nursing assistant in the "To Huus" nursing home in Barßel. Her superiors

31 Das Erste. MOMA-Reporter: Kirchenvorstand vor der Abschiebung?.

On: <https://www.daserste.de/information/politik-weltgeschehen/morgenmagazin/reportagen/moma-reporter-Kirchenvorstand-Abschiebung-Nazer-Resai-Afghanistan-100.html>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

32 Bayerischer Rundfunk. Nürnberg will verheiratete Christin in den Iran abschieben.

On: <https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/nuernberg-willverheiratete-christin-in-den-iran-abschieben,SabMKmU>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

33 OM online. Barßelerin droht Abschiebung in den Iran.

On: <https://www.om-online.de/om/barselerin-droht-abschiebung-in-den-iran-75695>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

are more than satisfied with the 44-year-old. "She is our sunshine. We don't want to lose Zahra," says care service manager Mechthild Hannebohn. "She knows what she's doing, after all, she worked in the hospital in Tehran," adds the facility's director, Reinhard Schmidt. But now the woman, who grew up in Tehran, and her 10-year-old son Barsam are threatened with deportation from Germany – to a country to which she no longer has any connection. Sheybani has been trying to stay in Germany for years. She has already applied for asylum several times, but these have been rejected by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

Hardship commission is the last chance for the mother and her son

Deportation to Iran would possibly mean death for her and her son. "The Koran would be opened and punishment by stoning would follow. Neither of them would survive that. An inhuman punishment," says Reinhard Schmidt. He is fighting for the nurse assistant to be able to stay in Barßel. "I feel very comfortable in Barßel and have a great employer," emphasizes Sheybani. She has many acquaintances and friends in the village. Her son does not know Iran at all and does not speak the language. He was 2 years old when he came to Germany. Now he is in the 4th grade and is a good student, his mother reports. The boy is very afraid of deportation.

Mayor Anhuth criticizes possible deportation

"It is humanly incomprehensible that a deportation is at stake here", criticizes Barßel's mayor Nils Anhuth (party-less). In the meantime, the member of the Bundestag Silvia Breher (CDU) has also been called in.

In light of the successful integration progress, the district of Cloppenburg regrets that Sheybani is to be deported and would welcome it if she could stay in Germany, the spokesman of the district authority, Frank Beumker, informs. But he also refers to the legal situation: The asylum applications have been rejected. Sheybani had not followed a request to obtain a passport in 2019. First in May 2020, when the time requirement for the issuance of a residence permit was fulfilled, she presented national passports for herself and her son and applied for the residence permit, explains Beumker. Too late. As a result, she says, the residence permit was denied as of May 10th, 2021. As far as the persecution in Iran based on her religion is concerned, these facts were assessed in the asylum procedure by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees and had already been partially confirmed by the court.

"Unfortunately, Ms Sheybani's description was not sufficient to justify her being granted protection under asylum law," explains the press officer. And so, the 44-year-old and her son must continue to fear and hope for the Hardship Commission of Lower Saxony.

Example 4 from 04/13/2021

Iranian family facing deportation: A question of faith³⁴

The Hemmatis have converted to Christianity after fleeing and fear persecution in their home country of Iran. But the judge does not believe them.

34 Allgäuer Anzeigblatt. Iranische Familie vor der Abschiebung: Eine Frage des Glaubens.

On: https://www.allgaeuer-zeitung.de/allgaeu/immenstadt/iranische-familie-vor-der-abschiebung-eine-frage-des-glaubens_arid-285349.

Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

Example 5 from 26th July 2021

Rottenburg an der Laaber: Blind asylum seeker to be deported³⁵

In Lower Bavaria, a couple is fighting with many supporters for the right of a 27-year-old Syrian to stay in Germany. He is to be sent to Spain – although the situation there for a blind refugee is uncertain, if not dangerous.

Saho has been blind since birth. Despite this, he managed to flee Idlib in 2014 via Turkey and then on to Spain. This could now be his undoing. A court has ruled that Spain, not Germany, is responsible for Saho's asylum procedure. Yet Saho has integrated himself in an exemplary manner in the short time he has been here. He is studying English at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) and works as a translator on the side.

His asylum procedure has been dragging on for two and a half years. During this time, a lot has happened to somehow prevent his deportation. A petition is currently running in the Bavarian Parliament, which will be dealt with further after the summer holidays, and the Protestant church community in Rottenburg recently sent a resolution to Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and the Interior Ministers Horst Seehofer and Joachim Herrmann. Some fellow students and lecturers at LMU also addressed the same addressees with a letter of protest. "We hold Mr. Saho in high esteem as a highly motivated, intelligent and committed young scientist. He is very popular with students and lecturers alike," it says. It would therefore be "inhumane" to tear him away from his environment.

SPD deputy Ruth Müller hopes that a petition will bring about a turnaround

The member of the state parliament Ruth Müller (SPD) is significantly involved in the petition of the parliament and hopes that this will, "bring movement into the case and Mheddin can stay here". She said it was unreasonable to deport a blind man to a country where no one cares about him and whose language he does not speak. "I hope that the public sympathy from many parts of the population will also signal that this is not a humane way to deal with him," says Müller.

But this does not change the fact that the BAMF continues to demand Saho's transfer to Spain. The federal authority refers to the Dublin III Regulation, according to which the member state responsible is the one in which the person seeking protection first entered or which issued him or her with a visa.

Talking to Saho, it quickly becomes apparent that he has had to deal intensively with paragraphs and unwieldy officialese over the past two and a half years: "According to Article 17 of the Dublin Regulation, Germany has the option of making a self-entry into the asylum procedure," he explains. In fact, the paragraph states that for "humanitarian reasons or in cases of hardship" it is possible to deviate from the responsibility criteria. From the point of view of the BAMF and the Administrative Court of Regensburg, on the other hand, "even considering Mr. Saho's blindness", it could not be assumed that he would be subjected to "inhuman or degrading treatment" in Spain. Saho sees it differently: "There is no care for disabled asylum seekers in Spain" and only a few buildings are handicap accessible. He refers to a UN report from 2019,

35 Süddeutsche Zeitung. Blinder Asylbewerber soll abgeschoben werden.

On: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/rottenburg-blinder-asylbewerber-abschiebung-1.5362364>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

which also states that refugees with disabilities face a "precarious situation" and a high risk of "humiliation, abuse and violence". According to the Foreign Office, while Saho's medical care can be provided in Spain, accommodation in "accommodation tailored to special needs" cannot. So the situation in Spain for a blind refugee is uncertain to say the least, if not dangerous. Nevertheless, Saho is to be deported.

Example 6 from 12/23/2019

Iranian convert in Remstal: Despite death penalty, deportation looms³⁶

A young man flees Iran because he has converted from Islam to Christianity. He finds a new home in German church communities. But the court denies him asylum and doubts the authenticity of his faith.

Schorndorf - Actually, Christmas is a great celebration of joy for deeply believing Christians like Kurosh. "But this year it is very sad," says the young man, whose real name is different. He smiles to hide how he is feeling. "It's bad. I've been broken since the verdict," he says.

Kurosh comes from Iran and has applied for asylum in Germany. The reason: religious persecution. Anyone who turns away from Islam in Iran is in danger of death and faces the death penalty. His application for asylum was rejected by the Stuttgart Administrative Court in March. The reason given was that he had only converted to Christianity as a pretense to have better chance at asylum.

How should one test faith?

The 37-year-old is stunned. "The judge cannot look into my heart. My faith is a private relationship between me and God. How is that to be examined?" says Kurosh, who lives in the Remstal. Whoever listens to him, whoever listens to the Protestant pastor Joachim Scheuber, will get an idea of the relationship between Kurosh and God. He got to know the Christian faith in Iran.

Not an isolated case

Pastor Scheuber writes the expert opinion for the asylum procedure. He too cannot see inside Kurosh. But he is firmly convinced that nothing will go wrong in his case: "We prayed together, we had many counseling sessions, he prayed for others. I wonder how someone who doesn't sincerely believe could do that," says Scheuber. He continues that he knows about ten converted refugee families: "And none has turned away from the Christian faith again."

The court hearing is a disaster for Kurosh. The Muslim interpreter cannot correctly render many Christian terms. Both Pastor Scheuber and the pastor of the Persian congregation, as well as members of the congregation accompany the 37-year-old as witnesses. They are not called to testify. Scheuber cannot understand the rejection of the application and especially the reasoning. Briefly summarized, it reads as follows: Because the conversion of a Muslim to Christianity is, according to the standards of the Islamic religion, an absolute breach of tradition beyond imagining, it is assumed that the conversion is not meant seriously.

³⁶ Stuttgarter Zeitung. Trotz Todesstrafe droht die Abschiebung.

On: <https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.iranischer-konvertit-im-remstal-trotz-todesstrafe-droht-die-abschiebung.cd26318d-7459-4da2-a653-7ff4100fa32a.html>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

And: Kurosh would only be in danger in Iran if he would carry his faith to the outside world. "I wonder what knowledge the judges actually have about the situation of Christians and especially converts in Iran, to make such a judgment," says Scheuber, who has networked with other asylum pastors and reports that the rejection of Kurosh is not an isolated case. "On the contrary," he says, "converted refugees are finding it increasingly difficult to be recognized." "Actually, you have to look for other reasons than religious persecution to still have a chance at asylum."

Example 7 from 05/31/2021

Interview Deutsche Welle with BAMF Vice President Ursula Gräfin Praschma

Praschma: "It's always about the individual case".³⁷

Deportations of Muslim refugees who have converted to Christianity in Germany are being criticized. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees defends its practice.

Is Germany allowed to deport Iranians who have converted to Christianity in Germany and applied for asylum? Again and again, there is criticism of this practice. Gottfried Martens, pastor of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Berlin, accused the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) of "superficiality" and "cynicism" in an interview with Deutsche Welle³⁸. BAMF Vice President Ursula Gräfin Praschma rejects the accusations and explains her office's practice in an interview with DW.

Deutsche Welle: Gräfin Praschma, the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Tehran, during a visit to Switzerland years ago, appealed for understanding for Iranians who left their country and were then baptized in Europe. In their home country they would possibly face the death penalty. How serious is the threat to converts who are deported to Iran?

Ursula Gräfin Praschma: The Federal Office has a comprehensive stock of data and information for each country, which is incorporated into our decision-making practice. Accordingly, we assume that both the Christian practice of faith and the conversion to faith can indeed trigger persecution in Iran. However, there are differences. In rural areas the dangers are certainly greater than in the cities, and missionary Christians are not allowed. So, there is persecution of Christians in Iran, but not every Christian in Iran is persecuted. Members of the recognized churches, such as the Armenians, are hardly affected. It depends on the individual circumstances in each case.

Many Iranians who come to Germany as refugees convert and are baptized as Christians. How do you see that?

Of course, conversion is an important circumstance for the asylum procedure and must be considered in our decisions. But it is always about the individual case.

37 Deutsche Welle. Praschma: „Es geht stets um den Einzelfall“.

On: <https://www.dw.com/de/praschma-es-geht-stets-um-den-einzelfall/a-57718159>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

38 Deutsche Welle. Pfarrer Gottfried Martens: Kritik an der Asylpraxis.

On: <https://www.dw.com/de/pfarrer-gottfried-martens-kritik-an-der-asylpraxis/a-57459208>. Last accessed on: 08/05/2021.

And it is a different matter if someone is baptized here whose first asylum procedure was already decided negatively and who only brings in his conversion as a reason after the fact. In the case of a conversion in Germany, we are examining the extent to which this is used as an asylum tactic.

But if, as per the Archbishop's statement, the longing for a conversion matured even before the flight?

Of course, there are refugees who already come to Germany with these thoughts, are cared for by Christians after fleeing. They enter thereby into concrete contact with Christianity for the first time and feel spiritually at home. That is a good reason for granting protection. Let me be quite clear: If someone is baptized in Germany, then they are a Christian and we do not question their Christianity. That is the highest commandment for us.

But of course, we also try to clarify whether this Christian's new faith manifests itself inwardly and they only go to church on holidays, or whether he is strongly moved by his new faith and involved in the church. This is also a decisive criterion which must also be considered in the decision.

You yourself are involved in the Protestant Church. Do you know converts in Germany who live the Christian faith only inwardly, i.e. without ties back to community and church services?

In the congregation where I myself sometimes preach, we have no converted Christians who have come to Germany by flight. But we do have converts from the Catholicism, for example, whom we do not experience very often in the congregation. And I also know from decades of experience in our congregation that there are many ways in which people live their faith.

You spoke of the BAMF recognizing the baptism of refugees as a matter of fact and at the same time mention the possible examination of whether the conversion had happened for asylum tactical reasons. So, in the end, the baptism is checked after all.

No. Absolutely not. It is about clarifying how the religious identity of the applicant is shaped. It's not about a religious exam or anything like that. We have to clarify whether there is a threat of persecution if the person concerned would have to return to their home country. If, after weighing all the arguments and facts, we have the impression that the applicant's life of faith would indeed lead to persecution there, then we grant protection. That is why it is always very helpful for us when we receive a certificate from the church as to what the religious life in the church community looks like. It is all about the prognosis of how he would behave later in his home country. The Federal Constitutional Court once said that we must be convinced of how the applicant's religious identity is developed in order to have a prediction for their behavior in their home country.

But the danger to life exists - as various experts confirm - not only by conspicuous religious practice but in conversion itself. This is considered apostasy and is life-threatening.

This varies from one country of origin to another. In Afghanistan, there is a threat of persecution if the change of faith becomes known. In Pakistan, for example, there are great differences between individual regions. In Iran, it depends very much on how the person concerned behaves. Because the Islamic Republic of Iran attaches great importance to people behaving in a compliant manner, they see someone that reaches out to Muslims with their Christian faith as a threat. It depends very much on the circumstances of the individual case.

There are repeated accusations that converts are assessed much more strictly at certain BAMF offices, for example Berlin and Eisenhüttenstadt in Brandenburg. They are said to issue plain rejections made of preformulated text blocs.

We always strive for uniformity in our decision-making practice. That is why we have uniform guidelines such as the Service Instruction on Asylum, which precisely regulates the handling of cases of converted refugees. We also have guiding principles for each country of origin. We then have quality control both on site and at the head office in Nuremberg.

Finally, there is a so-called protection rate comparison. For the second half of 2020, a below-average rate was noticed in the Berlin area. This has been reviewed and the findings have shown that the deviations had a plausible explanation from our point of view. In Berlin and Brandenburg, there were in 2020 and 2021 a total of 26 cases with 40 persons of Iranian nationality to whom we granted protection due to conversion. So, it is not the case that everyone is rejected.

26 of how many cases in total?

I cannot say exactly, because the reasons given are so individual that they cannot be recorded statistically. What is clear, however, is that there is no blanket rejection. There are acceptances in Berlin and Brandenburg, even if they are somewhat below average compared to the rest of Germany, which, given the relatively small number of Iranian converts in relation to the total number of applicants, may also have statistical reasons. I can assure you; we really try to do justice to every individual case at our offices nationwide.

Ursula Gräfin Praschma is an attorney. She has been Vice President at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) since May 2020. She has been active for 35 years and previously served for three years as a judge in an administrative court.

11. Demands to the federal and state governments

- >> The certificates of church congregations (faith affidavits) should be consistently and uniformly considered by the courts and BAMF as an expert opinion indicative of a religious conviction and identity-forming religious influence with significant implications in asylum law.
- >> The EU Qualification Directive RL 2011/95/EU must be fully implemented according to its intention.
- >> The BAMF country profiles should provide comprehensive and up-to-date information on the pressure of persecution resulting from conversion. The situation of converts has worsened in many countries in recent years, in some cases considerably. For this reason, it is neither comprehensible nor acceptable that decisions of the BAMF as well as the administrative courts are often based on assessments by the Federal Foreign Office and former rulings by administrative courts several years out of date.
- >> BAMF questionnaires should be continually assessed to ensure that they are up to date, taking account of changes in the lives of refugee converts caused for example by the pandemic.
- >> Even when confined to a legal framework, public servants are called upon to treat the people they deal with, with the upmost humanity, avoiding additional hardship and suffering where possible.

12. Contributors

- Dr. Detlef Blöcher: data processing, statistics and methodology
- Simon Luca Kranich (Student of political science and protestant theology): editing
- Open Doors Germany e.V.: Editor (initiation, planning and implementation)

13. Appendixes

13.1. Previous studies

Refugee Survey October 2016



The study can be accessed at www.opendoors.de/refugeereport

Documentation Rotenburg 2016



The survey can be accessed at: www.opendoors.de/bericht-rotenburg-2016

Survey Converts October 2019



The survey can be accessed at www.opendoors.de/report-converts

The "Survey Converts October 2019" can also be ordered in printed form free of charge from Open Doors Germany at: info@opendoors.de and 06195 6767-0.

13.2. Questionnaire

Recording the situation of converts seeking protection in Germany
Survey on faith affidavits and asylum protection

Questionnaire No.
Fills Open Doors

Details of your congregation and contact person (will be anonymized and not passed on to third parties)	
Name of the (church) congregation	
Location	
ZIP CODE	
State	
Denomination	
Name of contact person	
Phone	
Mobile	
Mail	

Please answer the following questions (please note the information at the end of the questionnaire)	Iran	Afghan- -istan	Iraq	Syria	Pakis- -tan	? ¹
1) How many refugees has your church congregation served in the last five years?						
2) How many converts from your congregation have applied for asylum protection in Germany due to persecution on religious grounds and presented a faith affidavit from your congregation, but were still not believed that their conversion was genuine/serious?	Please do not enter anything here					
3) Person rejected by BAMF despite faith affidavit						
a) 2017						
b) 2018						
c) 2019						
d) 2020						
e) 2021						
4) Person rejected despite faith affidavit at AC						
a) 2017						
b) 2018						
c) 2019						
d) 2020						
e) 2021						
5) How many converts had to go back to their home country						
a) 2017						
b) 2018						
c) 2019						
d) 2020						
e) 2021						
Are there any observations that are important to you in connection with the survey on the situation of converts?						

NOTE > Your information will be anonymized, no personal or congregational data will be published and/or passed on to third parties. Open Doors will evaluate the data and provide the BAMF with an assessment of the situation of converts.

¹ If necessary, overwrite this field with another country name (e.g. Eritrea, Nigeria, Mali, etc.). You can also overwrite used country names.

Please send the completed questionnaire to ado.greve@opendoors.de by 22nd of June 2021

Please feel free to forward the questionnaire to other congregations as well.

13.3. Survey methodology

The questionnaire was initially sent by e-mail on June 9th, 2021, to 177 congregations from state protestant and free churches, and later to a few more. In the cover letter, the participating congregations were assured of absolute confidentiality and that the report would contain only totals or averages. There were individual queries about the questionnaire, which were answered immediately by telephone or in written form.

Those congregations that had not responded by June 23rd were reminded by e-mail on June 23rd of the deadline for responses – with an extension granted until July 6th for the return of completed questionnaires. Of the 135 participating congregations, 113 congregations provided quantitative information, representing a total of 5,207 converts. Twenty other congregations and two local Evangelical Alliances did not provide quantitative information but sent in written notes or comments.

Most of the answers were entered on the Word document of the questionnaire and were sent to Open Doors via e-mail. Other questionnaires were handwritten and came by post, fax or electronically as a PDF. All responses were checked for consistency and missing responses, or discrepancies were clarified by telephone or email.

The data was transferred semi-automatically to an Excel form to avoid transfer errors. The complex data set of the questionnaire with 181 fields was transferred into one row. This row was again copied and pasted and transferred to an Excel database.

The data set contained information on the congregation (town, federal state, association of congregations) as well as figures on the nationality of converts, number of rejections following the BAMF hearing and or appeal to the Administrative Court (AC), deportations. Additional notes/comments written on the questionnaire or in the accompanying e-mail were evaluated by content and word analysis. They are reported anonymously in Chapter 7 of the survey. Of the 113 quantitative data sets, totals, means, standard deviations and statistical standard errors were calculated, and subgroups were selected according to various criteria and statistically analyzed. Data processing was done on a password-protected PC using Excel spreadsheet software.

To preserve anonymity, only totals and mean values are published, as well as anonymized quotations are published in the report. Absolute confidentiality was assured to the participating congregations in the cover letter to the questionnaire.

To what degree is this survey representative?

All congregations can be reached by e-mail today (as of 08/09/2021), so the survey method (by e-mail) does not represent a bias. As opposed to a telephone survey, the written questionnaire and the response time of 14 days also allowed sufficient time for personal reflection, research if necessary – this is much better than with a telephone survey. The contact details provided (telephone, e-mail address) also enabled queries and clarification of terms and unclear information.

The survey was self-selective, i.e. a congregation contacted decided for itself whether or not to participate in the survey. The surprisingly high response rate of

61 % also alleviates sample bias, especially as some objective factors (as explained in chapter 7) limited the response to the questionnaire:

- Limit of the study period from 2017 to May 2021;
- Relocation of refugees to other places of residence, few new refugees have arrived in recent years;
- Long asylum procedures and the refugees' honor/shame make it difficult to obtain information;
- out of concern for the safety of the refugees, some congregations have not responded;
- workload to gather the exact figures;
- some congregations do not issue faith affidavits as a matter of policy, but this was the basis of the current survey;
- other churches care for refugees who are not converts.

The survey collected these facts:

- Number and country of origin of refugee converts who regularly participate in congregational life;
- how many were denied protection status after the BAMF hearing or AC procedure despite the issuance of a faith affidavit by the pastor;
- Number of deportations.

Open Doors received responses from all federal states as well as from the large Protestant congregational associations in the corresponding proportion. The results agreed relatively well for the subgroups, so that no pronounced sample bias is discernible. Therefore, the responses were not weighted.

Moreover, the number of refugee converts represented is sufficiently large at 5,207, which represents a statistical error of 1.4 %; the sample covers approximately 8 % of the population, so that it can be considered quasi-representative.

Ultimately, the goal of the study is not to make a general statement about the population that is as accurate as possible, but rather to highlight the personal fate of more than 5,000 converts.

Legal

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About Open Doors

As a non-denominational Christian relief organization, Open Doors has been serving persecuted Christians for more than 65 years; today in over 60 countries. Each year, Open Doors publishes the World Watch List, a ranking of 50 countries in which Christians are most persecuted. According to current estimates, some 309 million Christians in these countries currently face very high to extreme levels of persecution. Open Doors projects include social-economic-development projects, training Christian leaders, advocacy for prisoners, emergency relief and trauma counseling, provision of Bibles and other Christian literature, and the support of the families of murdered Christians. With a variety of publications and lectures about persecution of Christians Open Doors raises prayer and financial support for persecuted Christians. The work of Open Doors Deutschland e.V. is financed by donations. The organization carries the Charity Certificate of the German Evangelical Alliance.

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Cover photo: Christian converts tell of their faith in Jesus (symbolic image) © 2020 Open Doors

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Im Dienst der verfolgten **Christen** weltweit