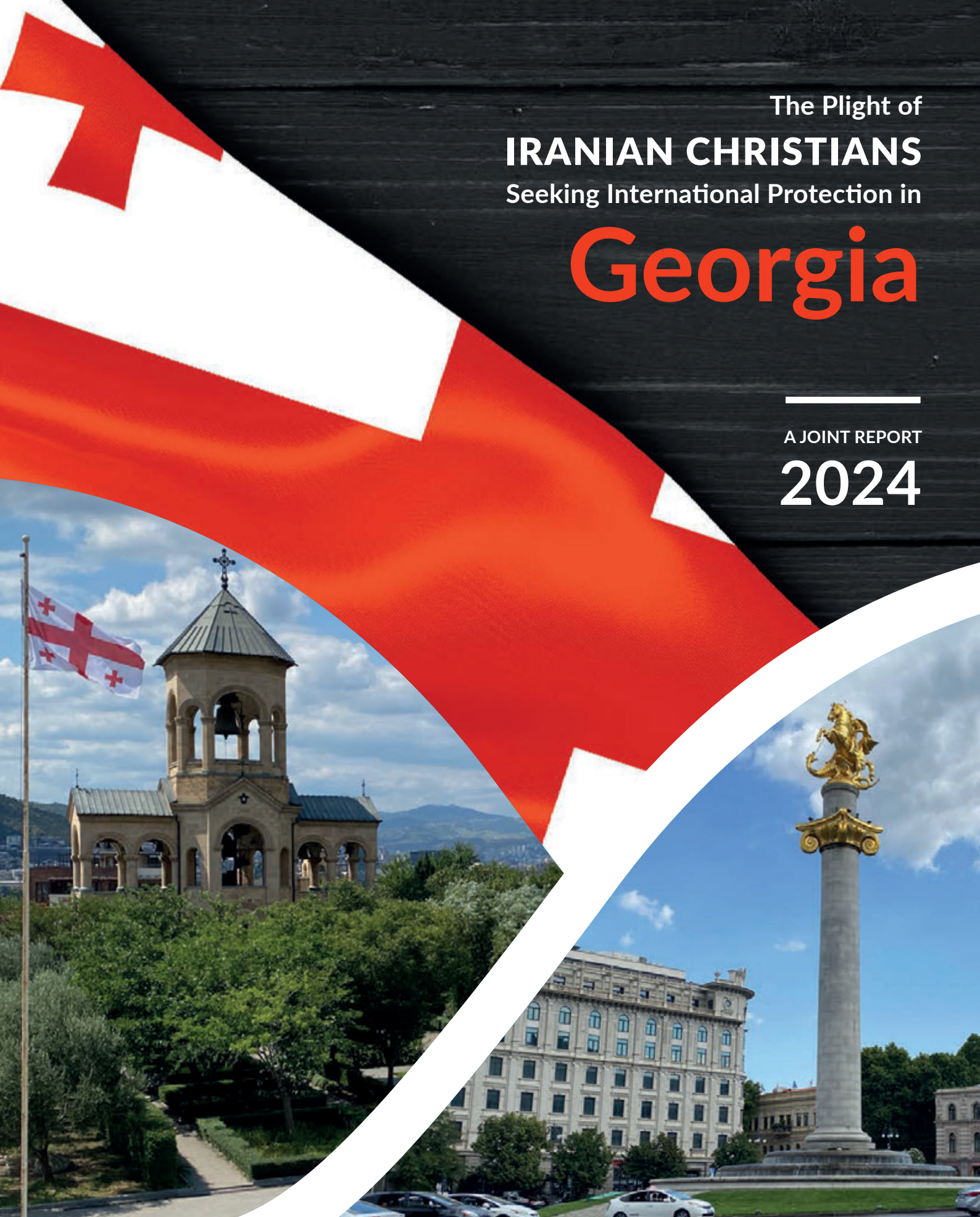


The Plight of
IRANIAN CHRISTIANS
Seeking International Protection in

Georgia

A JOINT REPORT

2024



Open Doors



CSW everyone
free to believe

Christian Solidarity Worldwide

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Executive Summary

The Georgian immigration authorities are consistently refusing the claims of Iranian Christians seeking asylum in Georgia, despite their well-founded fear of persecution should they return to Iran.

This is the conclusion of this latest joint report by Article18, CSW, Open Doors and Middle East Concern, which is based on in-depth interviews with Iranian Christian asylum seekers and their legal representatives.

The most commonly stated reason for the rejection of claims is that Iranian Christians' faith is found not to be genuine. However, even in the few cases where an Iranian Christian's faith is accepted, their claims continue to be rejected due to the Georgian authorities' apparent unwillingness to accept that Christians face persecution in Iran.

Iranian Christians seeking asylum in Georgia therefore face an uncertain future, with little hope of being recognised as refugees but having few alternative options to access international protection.

Several individuals whose asylum claims have been rejected in Georgia have already spent years as refugees in neighbouring countries such as Türkiye, and say they no longer know what to do, nor where to go.

They appeal to the Georgian authorities to recognise the legitimacy of their claims, and to the international community to open up new safe, legal routes for resettlement.

The report authors respectfully suggest, in view of the personal testimonies and documented evidence from Iranian Christian asylum seekers known to us, that the assessments of immigration officials and court decisions rejecting these asylum claims fail to recognise the claimants' genuine need for international protection, and to acknowledge their well-founded fear that meets the criteria of a refugee.

The rejection of cases previously recognised by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the similarity of reasons given for rejections support the observation that the refugee determination process needs to be more thorough, involving a careful examination of the claimant's case in the light of relevant information on the current context for Christians in Iran, and particularly Christian converts.

In assessing the credibility of the conversion of an Iranian asylum seeker, the diversity of Christian belief, both worldwide and within the Christian community in Iran, should be recognised, especially with reference to Christian converts¹. The Christian faith, as understood internationally, is not restricted to the Orthodox Church and its traditions. In cases where Christian converts are confirmed within denominations such as the Anglican Church, or enrolled as theology students in institutions such as the Pars Theological Centre², their credibility as Christians should be considered established.

The violations of the rights of Christians – in particular converts and those who actively promote their faith and provide spiritual guidance to converts – are extensively documented and commented upon by numerous respected sources, including the United Nations (UN)³, and multiple independent organisations concerned with the state of human rights in Iran. The organisations responsible for this report also provide a detailed annual report on the human rights violations experienced by the Christian community in Iran⁴. We respectfully recommend that the immigration authorities refer to such reports when assessing whether asylum claimants have a well-founded fear of persecution in Iran.

1 According to the most reliable information available through surveys and independent testimonies, the majority of the Christian community in Iran consists of converts affiliated with Protestant/Evangelical denominations. However, the Iranian authorities only recognise the ethnic communities of Armenians, Assyrians and Georgians (and expatriates) as Christians, in violation of the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) of all Iranian citizens as articulated in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

2 Pars Theological Centre, <https://parstheology.org/>

3 For example, 'Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran', Seventy-eighth session Third Committee Agenda item 71 (c), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/ltid/n23/331/22/pdf/n2333122.pdf>, page 6

4 'Annual Report: Rights Violations Against Christians in Iran: 2024', Article 18, CSW Middle East Concern and Open Doors, <https://www.mecconcern.org/2024/02/19/annual-report-rights-violations-against-christians-in-iran-2024/>

Why Are Iranian Christians Seeking Asylum In Georgia?

The relentless oppression of Christians – and particularly converts from Islam – since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 has caused many to flee, often following arrest, imprisonment or other mistreatment.

The most common first destination for Iranians fleeing their country is Türkiye, but in recent years, owing to increasingly restrictive conditions⁵ for asylum seekers and heightened societal hostility⁶ towards minority faiths, a growing number of Iranians have been seeking alternative places of refuge, with one of the realistic options being Georgia.

Approximately 85% of the population of Georgia identify as Orthodox Christians, while it is a convenient country for Iranians to travel to and to remain for 45 days on tourist visas. Georgia also offers attractive working conditions compared to other countries where Iranians have traditionally sought asylum, offering anyone – including asylum seekers – the chance to work and make money, without restrictions. The warm climate, cosmopolitan atmosphere, and easy living conditions – for those with resources – are among other factors that make Georgia an attractive prospect for Iranians seeking refuge.

“I chose Georgia because it is a Christian country, it’s economy is better than Armenia’s, and I can work here,” one Iranian Christian asylum seeker, Hadi Pourmohammadi, explained. *“And the other reason was that I was thinking that it’s not connected to Iran, so it’s more safe and secure for me.”*

In 2023, nearly 20% of all asylum seekers in Georgia were Iranian: 204 out of 1,052 claimants. Meanwhile, according to a Georgian asylum lawyer interviewed for this report, around 90% of Iranian asylum claims are based on a purported conversion to Christianity.

However, Iranian asylum seekers are facing significant and intensifying challenges in Georgia, as outlined in the remainder of this report through the testimonies of the asylum seekers themselves.

The warm climate, cosmopolitan atmosphere, and easy living conditions – for those with resources – are among other factors that make Georgia an attractive prospect for Iranians seeking refuge.

5 ‘The Plight of Iranian Christians Claiming International Protection in Türkiye’ Article 18, CSW Middle East Concern and Open Doors, <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/13404/>

6 CSW, ‘Türkiye: Submission to the 49th session of the Universal Periodic Review’, 28 Oct 2024, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2024/10/28/report/6338/article.htm>



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of Iranian asylum claims are based on a purported conversion to Christianity

Why Are Their Asylum Claims Being Rejected?

At the time of writing, Iranian Christians with valid, well-documented claims that should meet the criteria for refugee status according to the 1951 Refugee Convention⁷ are consistently being rejected by the immigration department, and resultant appeals have upheld the refusal to grant international protection.

The reasons for this are multi-faceted, and the consequence is that several hundred Iranian Christians currently seeking asylum in Georgia have little hope of being permitted to remain in the country for long.

In the opinion of the asylum lawyer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, the primary reason for the rejection of the claims of Iranian Christians is Georgia's burgeoning relationship with Iran:

"Over the past three or four years, the two governments have forged a very good relationship. The new prime minister [Irakli Kobakhidze, who took office in February 2024] has travelled to Iran two or three times in just a few months. In 2023, trade between Iran and Georgia officially amounted to \$270 million, and unofficially the amount could be \$500 million.

"For the Georgian government, this is very important, because Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are inside [surrounded by] three big countries – Russia, Türkiye and Iran. Georgia and Russia cannot have a good relationship, and while Türkiye is good partner, if you are a small country and all your imports are from one country [Türkiye] and this country in its history occupied your cities, this is dangerous.

"So, for the Georgian government, Iran is very important, and if you are a small country and you need to make a good relationship to your big neighbour [Iran], you cannot give that neighbour's citizens refugee status. In all the times we go to court [for cases involving Iranian Christians], the [Georgian] migration department tells the court that Christians don't have any problem in Iran, and that if Christians go back to Iran, they won't have any problem."

"They are using it as an excuse not to accept people. I don't know, but maybe there is politics behind it, because the Georgian prime minister went [to Iran] a few times, and the economy depends on Persian tourists."

Jalal Darzi

Iranian Christian asylum seeker



Iranian Embassy in Tbilisi

⁷ The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country".

Yet, according to Iranian Christian asylum seeker Jalal Darzi, this is “completely wrong”:

“They are using it as an excuse not to accept people. There’s a lot of news out there [about the situation of Christians in Iran], but they want to find an excuse. I don’t know about politics, but maybe there is politics behind it, because the Georgian prime minister went there a few times, and the economy depends on Persian tourists.”

“The immigration office of Georgia is in the hands of the embassy of the Islamic regime,” said another asylum seeker, Behzad Asiaie, a recent convert to Christianity whose claim is based on his activism in Iran and not his newfound faith.

Evidence for Mr Asiaie’s claim is found in the testimony of Reza Fazeli, another Iranian Christian asylum seeker, who led Anchor of Hope, a Persian-speaking church in Tbilisi, before it was obliged to close.

Pastor Fazeli said that in July 2024, he was summoned by the Georgian Secret Service for a meeting and told that Georgia’s commitment to the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations outweighed its commitment to the Refugee Convention.

“They said the diplomatic relationship was more important: that it came first for them, and that ‘secondly we must obey the refugee and asylum seeker rules,’” the pastor testified.



Reza Fazeli



Pastor Fazeli's empty church

During this same meeting, Pastor Fazeli says he was ordered to close his church – which remains shut at the time of writing – as well as to refrain from gathering with others in groups of more than five, and from conducting interviews with any news agencies.

Another asylum seeker, Amin Zangeneh Zad, claimed that during a recent visit to the Iranian embassy he was told by an official there that “the Iranian government has asked the Georgian Government to reject the claims of all of you [Christians] because Christianity is now recognised, according to new information we have received, as dangerous and a cover for spying”.

The asylum lawyer pointed out that “there is a second reason” for the rejection of claims from Iranian Christian asylum seekers:

“Around 20 years ago, the Georgian patriarch, Ilia II, met with Iran’s Supreme Leader and made a deal behind the curtain. Georgia has around 300,000 Shia Muslims of Azerbaijani origin, and they made a deal that Georgia wouldn’t make problems for Shia Muslims, and Iran’s government wouldn’t make problems for its 12,000-15,000 Georgian Orthodox citizens.”

However, the situation of non-Christian Iranians is not much better, the lawyer said, explaining that over the past three years, less than 1% of the more than 1,000 Iranians who have claimed asylum – on whatever grounds – have received positive answers from Georgia’s immigration service.

On What Grounds Are Claims Rejected?



Jalal Darzi

Case 1: Jalal Darzi

In the majority of cases, the asylum claims of Iranian Christians are rejected on the basis that their faith is found not to be genuine, as happened to Jalal Darzi, who was rejected after his second interview on the basis that he had not been able to prove he was a Christian.

However, Mr Darzi claims the questions he was asked related only to Orthodox Christianity, about which he had no knowledge, and that when he tried to speak about his beliefs, this was not permitted:

"[The interviewer] said: 'When I have a question, you should answer.' A lot of times she stopped me. I said, 'Let me talk!' But she stopped me, so I didn't carry on. I felt like it was a kind of formality, that obviously they'd made a decision before the interview."

"I felt it was a kind of formality, that obviously they'd made a decision before the interview."

Jalal Darzi

Iranian Christian asylum seeker



Iliya Rahnama

Case 2: Iliya Rahnama

Another asylum seeker, Iliya Rahnama, who was forced to leave Georgia in May 2024 after his final appeal against the rejection of his claim was dismissed, said his lawyer told him before his first interview that there was a "99% chance" his application would be rejected:

"I said: 'Why?' And she said: 'Because you have three problems for the Georgian court. First problem: you are from Iran. Second problem: you are a single Iranian male. And third problem: you aren't Orthodox.'"

"I said: 'Why?' And she said: 'Because you have three problems for the Georgian court. First problem: you are from Iran. Second problem: you are a single Iranian male. And third problem: you aren't Orthodox.'"

Iliya Rahnama

Iranian Christian asylum seeker

Case 3: Hadi Pourmohammadi

Meanwhile, Hadi Pourmohammadi said that having had positive experiences during his first interviews with staff of the UNHCR in Türkiye – where he was recognised as a refugee in 2018 before fleeing to Georgia a year later after being threatened with refoulement, he had assumed the questions he was being asked by the Georgian immigration authorities were “friendly, but later I found everything they asked me was because they wanted to make a trap for me”:

“The first question they asked me was: **‘Which branch of Christianity are you from’, and I told them, ‘I’m Protestant, Evangelical.’** But still they continued asking me questions about the Orthodox Church, like: **‘How many prayer times do we have in a day? Do you know the prayers for morning, noon and evening?’**

And I said to myself: **‘Is this Islam?’** Because I had experienced that in Islam, and I didn’t see anything about it in the Bible. But they continued asking me this kind of question, and I said, **‘I don’t know about this. I know the salvation prayer. And I know the prayer Jesus gave as an example for us.’**”

Nevertheless, Mr Pourmohammadi felt that all his interviews had gone well and was “very happy until the time I got a letter from the immigration department and found out I had been rejected, and the reason was: **‘We can’t believe that you are Christian, because your understanding, your knowledge about the Bible is not deep. And also we can’t believe that you would have a problem in your country.’** Reading that broke me.”

“I was very happy until the time I got a letter from the immigration department and found out I had been rejected, and the reason was: ‘We can’t believe that you are Christian, because your understanding, your knowledge about the Bible is not deep. And also we can’t believe that you would have a problem in your country.’ Reading that broke me.”

“I chose Georgia because it is a Christian country, it’s economy is better than Armenia’s, and I can work here.”

Hadi Pourmohammadi
Iranian Christian asylum seeker



Hadi Pourmohammadi

Another Iranian Christian interviewed for this report, Hiran Fazeli, said that his claim was rejected even though he had been able to answer the questions relating to Orthodox Christianity, having been baptised into the Orthodox Church.

Case 4: Pastor Reza Fazeli



But while most Iranian Christians are rejected due to disputes regarding the genuineness of their faith, the claims of both Pastor Fazeli and Amin Zangeneh Zad were rejected even though their faith was accepted.

“Praise the Lord, I was the first person to be recognised that way!” Pastor Fazeli said. “But after that, they said: ‘You won’t have any problem in your country. You can go back.’”

In his September 2023 rejection letter from the Georgian migration department, a copy of which the report authors have seen, Pastor Fazeli was told:

“It has been found credible that you have rejected Shia Islam and are now a Protestant Christian. Also, your activities ... as a Christian have been deemed credible. However, based on the individual circumstances of your case, it has not been established that there is a well-founded fear of persecution upon your return to the country of origin.”

The letter noted the pastor’s participation in protests in Georgia and interviews with “various TV programmes” regarding political issues, but said the “small scale of the mentioned political activities” meant “the existence of future threats related to this issue was not considered reliable”.

“It should be noted that in relation to the general situation in [Iran] in terms of security,” the letter stated, “based on the joint analysis of your statement and the information sought by the Ministry about the country of origin, we consider that there are no expected problems in terms of security in your country of origin.”

Case 5: Behzad Asiaie



Meanwhile, political activist Behzad Asiaie was also told in his rejection letter, a copy of which the report authors have seen, that he would have no problem were he to return to Iran, despite having already spent time in prison there for his activism, and leading several protests outside the Iranian embassy in Tbilisi.

The rejection letter stated that the Georgian immigration authorities “did not consider it reliable that he had been convicted in the past for political reasons in Iran” but that “even if it was considered reliable, it did not prove [he] would be threatened in the future in the country of origin”.

The letter added that while it was “considered valid” that Mr Asiaie had “expressed a political opinion on social networks in criticism of the ruling power of the Islamic Republic of Iran... it has not been confirmed that on this basis, he may be a victim of persecution in his country of origin”.

Case 6: Amin Zangeneh Zad



Amin Zangeneh Zad's experiences bear close resemblance to Pastor Fazeli's:

"[The immigration department] said: *'You're a Christian, OK, but even though you're a Christian, even though you do evangelism, we believe you're not in any danger In Iran.'* I was shocked, because how can they say so? I have translated more than five theology books into Persian, and my name is written on them, and they said: *'OK, you did this but it's not dangerous for you [to go back].'*"

Mr Zangeneh Zad said he went on to tell the court that he had fled Iran because he was threatened by a co-worker as a result of converting to Christianity, but the representative of the Georgian immigration service simply responded: "No, it's not dangerous." And that after that, they told him: "You're lying. You made up these stories."

Mr Zangeneh Zad added that the representative alleged he had claimed asylum because he "wanted to immigrate to Georgia in a cheaper way", to which Mr Zangeneh Zad, who lives in a 14-square-metre basement flat, responded that he struggles to make ends meet after not being able to find employment for the past year. "OK, so I lost all my privileges in Iran to come here and live in a basement?" he said.

In his February 2023 rejection letter, which the report authors have seen, the Georgian migration department said Mr Zangeneh Zad's "knowledge of the basic issues of Christian doctrine is not solid", but that it "believes that you are carrying out evangelistic activities".

"However, based on the individual circumstances of your case, it has not been established that there is a well-founded fear of persecution upon return to

the country of origin. Based on the analysis of the information obtained about the country of origin, we may conclude that based on your individual profile, if you return to the Islamic Republic of Iran, you will not face a real risk of serious harm and, therefore, you do not require humanitarian protection. It should be noted that regarding the general situation in the country in terms of security, based on the joint analysis of your statement and the information sought by the Ministry about the country of origin, we consider that there are no expected security problems in your country of origin."

The wording in both Mr Zangeneh Zad and Pastor Fazeli's rejection letters is strikingly similar, and Hadi Pourmohammadi testified that many of his friends received almost identical rejection letters:

"It is like it is the same letter for all Iranian Christians. Just, they took my name [out] and put [my friend's] name in. So, all of us were told: 'We don't believe that you are Christian. And we don't believe that you will have a problem in your country.' That's why we were rejected, and I thought: 'Oh, why didn't they put more time to write different letters for us? Why did they judge all Iranian believers so easily?'"



What Other Challenges Are They Facing?



Georgian Parliament

Rising costs and lack of work

While Georgia offers asylum seekers the chance to work, a lack of job opportunities and no financial support from the state has caused problems for some of the Iranian Christians who have sought asylum in Georgia, especially those with disabilities.

Amin Zangeneh Zad, who has an autoimmune disease which affects his movement, says that as a result of not being able to find a job for the past year, he can no longer afford his medicine, nor even the clothes on his back:

“I’m sorry to say that the trousers that I wear now are a gift from my mother, and this tee shirt is a Christian brother’s gift. I feel so ashamed, so embarrassed, but I can’t do anything. I cannot walk easily – my knees are so painful – so the jobs that I can do are only computer jobs. In Iran I was a supervisor in a big company, so I lived like a king, but now I’m the position of a beggar.”

In a similar position is fellow asylum seeker and Christian convert Sasan Rezaee, who is paralysed from the waist down.

Mr Rezaee only arrived in Georgia in May 2024, after being threatened with refoulement to Iran from Türkiye, where he first claimed asylum back in 2016.

Mr Rezaee was initially granted refugee status by the UNHCR, but this decision was overturned when the Turkish authorities took charge of asylum cases.

In Türkiye, Mr Rezaee found employment washing fish, but he said that in Georgia work opportunities for disabled persons are fewer and farther between, while the cost of living has soared in recent years:

“I lived in a small city in Türkiye, but I could still find a job. But here, there are only three and a half million people, compared to 90 million in Türkiye, so it’s much more difficult.”



Sasan Rezaee



Vake Park



Peace Bridge

Meanwhile, although Mr Darzi has been able to find work, he is afraid of falling ill:

“When I was in Iran, I had three insurances, but here we don’t have insurance and I am scared about having to go to the doctor, because even just to pay for an endoscopy, for example, would cost 600 Georgian lari [\$200 dollars], which is way too much money.”

He added: “If you have money and are able to stay here, Georgia is good place, but if you don’t, you will face affliction and suffer.”

“My knees are so painful – so the jobs that I can do are only computer ones. In Iran, I was a supervisor in a big company, so I lived like a king, but now I’m in the position of a beggar.”

Amin Zangeneh Zad
Iranian Christian asylum seeker

Challenges faced by asylum seekers:

- Discrimination
- Spying accusations
- No medical insurance
- Unhelpful authorities
- Lack of funds
- Soaring costs of living
- Refoulement threats
- Intolerance
- Shame and embarrassment
- Discouragement
- Lack of job opportunities



Holy Trinity Cathedral

Discrimination

Iranian Christians in Georgia also report increasing anti-refugee sentiment, as well as intolerance of expressions of Christianity other than Georgian Orthodox.

Hadi Pourmohammadi said that during one of his interviews, the representative of the Georgian immigration department asked his lawyer why she was “defending a foreigner and rejecting us [Georgians]”.

Mr Pourmohammadi said he had assumed this “act of racism” would make the judge more sympathetic to him, but “unfortunately it didn’t happen”.

“Georgian people don’t want refugees, the same way as other countries,” the asylum lawyer explained. “Georgia is a small and poor country, and many times the Georgian people say: *‘Why do we need refugees when Georgian citizens don’t have enough money for living?’*”

And regarding Iranians, and Iranian Christians in particular, Amin Zangeneh Zad said there is a general lack of acceptance of other expressions of Christianity:

“The Georgian government and Orthodox community hate all things that smell like Western ideals, including Protestant Christianity, which is somehow mixed up in their eyes with the concept of homosexuality and other liberal ideas. In their eyes, any person who does not share their idea of Christianity is something odd, something strange. So for them, Christianity

is somehow mixed up with their nationality, their nationalism, and also their racism.”

Pastor Fazeli, whose church is from the Baptist denomination, said Georgians in general “don’t have enough information about other branches of Christianity, and think that if we don’t believe in their calendar, Saints days and rules, then we are the same as Jehovah’s Witnesses. Sometimes they ask: ‘Do you believe in the Trinity? Do you read the Psalms?’, or ‘Do you make the sign of the Cross?’, and I say: ‘No, because the Cross is in my heart.’”

Amin Zangeneh Zad said a Georgian friend of his accused him three times of being a spy:

“The last time, I cried because he was my friend. He’s still my friend, and I asked him: ‘Why did you call me a spy?’

He said: ‘Because you are Protestant, you’re not Orthodox, and any Protestant here who serves as a missionary, as a Christian here, or goes outside and evangelises, he is a spy from the United States. You work with the United States government; you work with Western countries; you want to destroy our country!’ So they don’t trust you easily. I saw that they don’t like foreigners, especially people from Iran, Muslims, or people from an Islamic background. A lot of bad behaviour that was done by foreigners and asylum seekers has affected their point of view.”



Svetitskhoveli Cathedral



But while Jalal Darzi said he had “heard a lot of negative things from Persian people here about Georgians and the Georgian government, for me it didn’t happen. I don’t know why. My landlord was awesome; my neighbours were not bad. I have good relationships with the Georgian people, because I tried to learn several Georgian words, and when you speak the language they respect you and accept you. I like Georgia, really, but I can’t stay because I can’t get residency and don’t have insurance.”

“Sometimes the Georgians ask: ‘Do you make the sign of the Cross?’ And I say: ‘No, because the Cross is in my heart.’”

Pastor Fazeli
Iranian Christian asylum seeker



Bell Tower in Holy Trinity Cathedral complex

What Are Their Hopes For The Future?

As a result of the challenges outlined above, there is a *growing sense of hopelessness* among Iranian Christian asylum seekers in Georgia, who feel increasingly doubtful about their chances of being granted refugee status, and equally uncertain about other options available to them.

After already spending nearly a decade as an asylum seeker in Türkiye prior to his recent arrival in Georgia, Sasan Rezaee says he is “so tired” that he has even contemplated returning to Iran and accepting “whatever punishment they may give me”:

“My body and my soul cannot stand this pressure much longer, but what can I do? I can’t stay here in Georgia. I can’t stay in Türkiye. I don’t want to go to Armenia, and I don’t want to go back to my country. But if they reject me here and I don’t have access to go to another part of the world, I will return to my country, because I’m tired of the asylum seeker situation. I’m so tired. I even think of suicide sometimes.”

Hadi Pourmohammadi, who also spent years in Türkiye before arriving in Georgia, said he too feels he is running out of options and expects his final appeal against the rejection of his claim to be dismissed:

“I know they won’t accept me and I will have to leave Georgia very soon. But the problem is, it’s nine years now I’ve been with the UNHCR in Türkiye and Georgia; nine years I’ve been a refugee. So it would be very hard for me to go to another country and apply again with the UNHCR. I can’t trust the UNHCR anymore. I don’t know what to do.”

Mr Pourmohammadi said that at one stage he had even contemplated flying to Venezuela – one of only a handful of countries that offers Iranians visa-free travel – and from there walking to the United States:

“I love Georgia and I want to stay forever in Georgia, but I must go to a country that will treat me fairly.”

And still, Mr Pourmohammadi said he would like to return to Georgia one day and continue his work among Persian-speaking Christians:

“I like everything that I do here and I want to continue it. I feel like anywhere I go, I want to come back to Georgia, or a country like Georgia – a country which is not connected to Iran, but it’s near Iran. I want to continue working with Iranian people and talking with them, telling them about God.”

Jalal Darzi, who is also currently appealing against the rejection of his asylum claim, said that he too would like to stay in Georgia but has begun seeking alternative options in the event he is ordered to leave:

“I think I might have one year to decide. Maybe my first appeal will take place in six months, and then the second after another six months. I’m trying to figure out where I should go, because a lot of my friends have already left, and the guy who first suggested I come here has just one month before [he found out] he must leave the country. I asked him: ‘Where are you going to go?’ And he said: ‘I don’t know.’”

Mr Darzi said he initially felt confident about his appeal, but that after seeing the appeals of several friends rejected, he now has doubts and is trying to prepare himself for the worst:

<1%

of 1000 Iranian asylum seekers’ applications have been accepted



“I don’t want to go there [to the court] and they give me one month to leave, and then I have just one month to think, ‘Where should I go?’”

Similarly, Amin Zangeneh Zad said he felt he had no option but to take matters into his own hands by visiting the Iranian embassy to have his passport renewed:

“I don’t want to pursue my asylum case anymore. I’m really tired. I cannot live this way anymore. I’m trying to find another country to go to – anywhere I can survive – but so far, I haven’t found any.”

Mr Zangeneh Zad said he feels he must soon leave Georgia, as he cannot find a job and knows he will not be able to rely on his mother’s support forever, as she is 74 years old, and also fears the value of the Iranian currency may further depreciate.

Pastor Fazeli has also attempted to aid his own resettlement by securing potential sponsors in both the USA and Canada, while Behzad Asiaie has received letters from several organisations in Europe, warning against his potential refoulement and calling for his resettlement. However, neither Pastor Fazeli, nor Mr Asiaie currently have valid passports, while both claim the Iranian embassy in Tbilisi has refused to provide them with any services.

“As an Iranian, if you have a passport you can go to Türkiye, Armenia, Georgia, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago, Malaysia or Indonesia – if you have a passport,” Pastor Fazeli explained. “But without a passport, you can’t do anything. Just go over the mountains.”

The pastor said he retains hope that the Georgian government “may change its mind” and accept asylum seekers like him, but the asylum lawyer is less optimistic:

“I don’t think so. I don’t think there is any way, because Iran’s embassy is very powerful in Georgia. I think the only way [forward] for Iranian Christian asylum seekers in Georgia is to go to other countries. Because, in the last three years after the Covid-19 pandemic, more than 1,000 Iranians have applied for



refugee status and less than 10 have been accepted. This is a very, very small percentage, less than 1%. The best scenario, with good evidence and a good judge, is that [the Georgian authorities] won’t cause any problem for the asylum seeker and they may be able to stay for four or five years, but without any hope of being recognised as a refugee.”

Some asylum seekers have already moved on, including Iliya Rahnama, who was given one month to leave Georgia after the final rejection of his claim. However, even in Armenia, the Christian convert’s future remains uncertain. In September 2024, Mr Rahnama’s first three-month tourist visa expired, and he was forced to leave the country for at least 24 hours in order for it to be renewed. Mr Rahnama said he does not know for how long he will be able to withstand the constant need to move in and out of the country. Yet at the same time, Mr Rahnama said he is currently too tired to consider other options, having already spent six years as an asylum seeker in Georgia, only to find himself starting the process all over again:

“I’m too tired to make a plan for the future, and I don’t know what I can do. As an Iranian Christian person, I think we have three problems: first, when we believe in Jesus Christ, we don’t have freedom in Iran. Second, we have an Iranian passport, and a lot of countries don’t accept our passport. And third, a lot of countries, like Georgia, don’t accept that we are Christian. This is our situation, and we don’t know what we can do.”

What Are They Asking Of The International Community?

Iranian Christians in Georgia feel increasingly hopeless about their chances of being granted asylum, and are looking to the international community for assistance.

Pastor Fazeli said he finds hope in Georgia's membership of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA):

"It's so useful, because the Georgian government says, for example, 'You're a Christian, you're not in danger.' But with one quick search online, in Persian or English, you can find the news that shows that is not true. And Georgia is a partner of this conference."

The pastor said he also hoped other IRFBA members may hear about the situation of Iranian Christian asylum seekers, and be moved to help them:

"Thirty-nine countries have joined this conference, and maybe one of them can say: 'OK, it's better that this family comes over here,' and maybe they are moved to Australia, for example, because official and legal refugees are better than illegal and unofficial ones."

However, other interviewees, such as Jalal Darzi, are less hopeful:

"I don't have any expectation of the international community because a lot of Christians were rejected here but human rights organisations didn't take any action. And they know what is happening in Iran, but they don't take any kind of action over that. Even I've heard from a lot of people that they have cooperation with the Islamic Republic government, unfortunately."

Amin Zangeneh Zad is similarly pessimistic, pointing to the many Western Christians who have visited him and then "vanished into thin air":

"I have seen a lot of especially white believers, who come here and say, 'Oh brother, we can do this for you, we can do that for you.' And of course, they took a lot of photos, a lot of testimonies, but eventually they vanished into thin air. So I just pray to God to do something."

Hadi Pourmohammadi said that when he first arrived in Türkiye in 2015, he saw many people leave the country to travel to Europe illegally but chose not to because he "didn't want to do something illegal", and was also very confident about his resettlement:

"I know many people know about me, my family, and what we experienced in Iran, and I was thinking: 'Why would I do something illegal when I can go to other countries normally, with the UNHCR? But now I feel like the UNHCR in Türkiye and Georgia don't do anything for Christians. I'm thinking about not just me; I'm thinking about people who don't have any connections; people who are believers and they take themselves to Georgia, and they know Georgia as a Christian country which can understand them. What's their feeling when they get the rejection letter and in that letter they are told: 'We don't believe that you are Christian'? And I know I'm Christian, and I know my friends are Christian."

"The world needs to do something for refugees. Refugees and Iranian Christian refugees are people who come out of Iran and always miss everything. They miss their families; they miss their streets, their people, their shops. I also miss the food, the friendships; everything from Iran. But I had to leave Iran, and it's about nine years I have lived outside, and it's not easy. Of course, I would love to live in my country, Iran, if I can. But I know that if I go to Iran, they will arrest me and they will make me disappear. It's extremely easy for them to do that, and several times they did that (to others)."

"These countries say: 'We don't feel that you have a problem in your country'. I have a question: if I go back to Iran and anything happens to me, are they responsible for that, or not? And I don't want to try that [returning to Iran], because I know what will

happen. So it's not fair, and it's not just me: there are many refugees in the same situation."

Mr Rahnama said he sometimes wonders whether Iranians are treated less fairly than others, for example those fleeing wars, and said Iranians are also at war – "with our government":

"What was our mistake? Most countries talk about freedom of religion. OK, I was Muslim and in 2012 I believed in Jesus Christ. Was that a mistake? Sometimes, I am confused why Europe, the USA, and other countries can't understand about Iranian Christians. Why do they close their eyes? They know our government is a terrorist government that supports terrorist groups. Our government has killed how many people in Iran? Did we say [to other countries]: 'Give us a house! Give us a car! Give us money!?' No, just we say: 'Please accept us, we want just to continue our life, we want just freedom. We want just to go to church. We want just to continue our life.' Please come and see our situation. Please open your eyes. Please have mercy. Please get justice for us."

"But now I feel like the UNHCR in Türkiye and Georgia don't do anything for Christians."

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Hadi Pourmohammadi

Iranian Christian asylum seeker



Recommendations



As a member of IRFBA, the State of Georgia has expressed a commitment to advancing Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to “protect[ing] members of religious minority groups worldwide”,⁸ and “upholding [its...] obligations under international law in general and the ICCPR specifically relating to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief”.⁹ Full membership of IRFBA carries an inherent commitment to upholding freedom of religion or belief within its borders.

“...Most countries talk about freedom of religion. OK, I was Muslim and in 2012 I believed in Jesus Christ. Was that a mistake? Sometimes, I am confused why Europe, the USA, and other countries can’t understand about Iranian Christians. Why do they close their eyes?”

Iliya Rahnama

Iranian Christian asylum seeker

The authors of this report commend Georgia for offering a haven, however temporary, for Iranian Christians fleeing religious persecution. Georgia is currently on the Human Rights Council (HRC). In a report for the 66th Session of the HRC this year the Special Rapporteur on Iran highlighted the fact that “the systematic, State-initiated persecution of Christian converts, including forcible denials of their right to freedom of religion or belief, constitute substantial violations of their rights”. Consequently, there is already a degree of awareness of the dire plight of Iranian Christians, and particularly, of converts, which is yet to permeate to those determining asylum.

We therefore urge the Georgian authorities to prioritise their international obligations with regard to upholding both FoRB, and the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol in cases involving Iranian asylum seekers. They have a well-founded fear of being persecuted on the basis of religion.

⁸ ‘What the Alliance Does’, International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-or-belief-alliance/>

⁹ ‘Principles of Action by the Alliance’, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/declaration-of-principles-for-the-international-religious-freedom-alliance/index.html>

We therefore appeal to the Georgian authorities responsible for processing asylum claims to:

01

ENSURE those responsible for immigration matters conduct a more thorough refugee determination process, by making reference to credible relevant contextual information regarding the situation of Iranian Christians, and particularly converts to Christianity.

In view of the personal testimonies and documented evidence of Iranian Christian asylum seekers known to the authors of this report, we are concerned that the assessments by immigration officials and the court decisions rejecting such asylum claims fail to recognise when there is a genuine need for international protection and to acknowledge the existence of a well-founded fear of persecution. This is illustrated by rejections of cases previously recognised by the UNHCR, and the similarity of reasons given for rejection.

02

RECOGNISE the diversity of Christian belief as demonstrated both globally, and within the Christian community in Iran, when assessing the authenticity of a religious conversion.

The Christian faith, as understood internationally, is not restricted to the Orthodox Church and its traditions. In cases where Christian converts are confirmed within denominations such as the Anglican Church, or are theology students in institutions such as the Pars Theological Centre, their credibility as Christians should be considered established. Many other converts will identify simply as being “Protestant” or “Evangelical”, and in such cases it would be appropriate to consult the leaders of these denominations to assess the credibility of any claim.

03

REFER to the reports by the UN Special Rapporteur on Iran, among others, when assessing the situation of Christians in Iran, and determining whether asylum claimants have a well-founded fear of persecution if they were to return.

The violations of the rights of Christians – in particular converts and those who actively promote their faith and provide spiritual guidance to converts – have been documented extensively over several decades by UN experts and multiple independent organisations concerned about the state of human rights in Iran. The organisations responsible for this report also provide a detailed annual report on the violations experienced by the Christian community in Iran.

We also make the following recommendations to the international community:

01

For urgent representations to be made by the IRFBA steering committee to the Georgian authorities regarding the plight of Iranian Christian asylum seekers.

02

An increase in efforts to ensure Iranian Christians who flee their country on account of religious persecution – or fear thereof – are protected and swiftly resettled.

03

The initiation of new safe and legal routes for Iranian Christians to be resettled.

04

The strengthening of regional protection mechanisms to ensure the continuing presence of Iranian Christians in the Middle East and Caucasus.

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