

COI Focus

IRAN

Treatment of returnees by their national authorities

30 March 2020 (update)

Cedoca

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The author has based the text on a wide range of public information selected with care and with a permanent concern for crosschecking sources. Even though the document tries to cover all the relevant aspects of the subject, the text is not necessarily exhaustive. If certain events, people or organizations are not mentioned, this does not mean that they did not exist.

All the sources used are briefly mentioned in a footnote and described in detail in a bibliography at the end of the document. Sources which have been consulted but which were not used are listed as consulted sources. In exceptional cases, sources are not mentioned by name. When specific information from this document is used, the user is asked to quote the source mentioned in the bibliography.

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List of abbreviations used

AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DIS	Danish Immigration Service
DVZ	Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken (Aliens Office)
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
EU	European Union
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IOM	International Organization for Migration
LP	Laissez-passer
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
SFH	Schweizerische Flüchtlingshilfe
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
USDOS	United States Department of State
USIP	United States Institute of Peace

Introduction

This report is an update of the COI Focus of 25 October 2018, titled COI Focus *Iran. Risico bij terugkeer*. The report describes the attitude of the Iranian authorities towards Iranian nationals who return to their country after leaving the country illegally, submitting a request for international protection in Belgium and/or having lived in Belgium. It does not discuss the treatment by the authorities of returnees with a political, ethnic, religious or terrorist profile.

This report concerns the period from 1 November 2018 to 1 March 2020.

A return to the country of origin must be considered when the foreign national no longer meets the conditions for staying in Belgium. This return can be voluntary or compulsory. Voluntary return means that the decision to return is made by the foreign national, who is able to organise the journey or can appeal to a repatriation programme coordinated by the Federaal Agentschap voor de Opvang van Asielzoekers (Fedasil; Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) and is organised by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or the Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken (DVZ; Aliens Office).¹ The return is compulsory when the host state sends the person back to their country of origin against their will. Compulsory returns are organised by DVZ.²

This report consists of six sections. While the first section describes the current migration context and the monitoring of Iranians in Europe, the second section deals with the relevant legislation in this respect. The third section discusses the readmission agreements between Belgium and/or the European Union (EU) and Iran. The fourth section is concerned with the types of return (voluntary and compulsory) applied by the Belgian authorities. In the fifth section, Cedoca discusses the arrival at the airport and examines the available information concerning the authorities present, the types of control and any problems that may occur. The follow-up actions by the authorities after return are described in the final section.

This non-exhaustive document has been prepared on the basis of available public information. Cedoca points out in this respect that the consulted sources do not always distinguish the type of return (voluntary or compulsory). Information was sometimes obtained directly from sources involved in the organisation of the return, such as DVZ and IOM. Cedoca has consulted different sources for this COI Focus: reports from other European asylum organisations, reports from the US State Department (USDOS), reports from Human Rights Watch (HRW) and a report from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Cedoca collected factual information from reliable Iranian and international media channels to serve as anecdotal illustrations.

Cedoca also consulted Amir Rashidi from the Center for Human Rights in Iran in October 2019, a researcher at the Netherlands asylum authority in 2017 and an academic in March 2019 (who wishes to be quoted anonymously for security reasons). According to Cedoca, this information is still up to date. Cedoca would like to point out that the information found is limited due to the sensitive nature of this subject in Iran.

¹ Fedasil, s.d., [url](#)

² Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals who are staying illegally in their territory was converted into Belgian law by three texts: the Act of 19 January 2012 amending the Act of 15 December 1980, i.e. the Act of 19 January 2012 amending the legislation regarding the reception of asylum seekers, the royal decree of 19 June 2012 amending the royal decree of 8 October 1981 regarding access to the territory, the stay, residence and removal of foreign nationals and the royal decree of 20 July 2001 regarding the operation of the staff of the general inspectorate of the federal and the local police within the context of controlling forced returns.

Cedoca uses the terms “application” and “asylum seeker” when it refers to information that predates the new terminology, which dates from the entry into force in March 2018 of the Act converting the EU’s Asylum Procedure Directive of 2013 into Belgian law.³

The literature search for this update was concluded on 20 March 2020.

³ CGVS, 21/03/2018, [url](#)

1. Migration context

1.1. General

Emigration from Iran is developing and increasing on the basis of a variety of internal dynamics in Iran, such as political, social and economic changes. An article in Al Jazeera in January 2019 claims that hundreds of thousands of Iranians have left their country over the past four decades.⁴ However, according to Cedoca there are no accurate current figures concerning the number of Iranians abroad. According to data⁵ of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) collected by the Pew Research Center, 400,000 Iranians are living in the United States, 140,000 in Canada and 50,000 in Australia. As far as Europe is concerned, the largest group of Iranians is in Germany (140,000).⁶ Approximately five to six million Iranians are living outside Iran, distributed all over the world.⁷

Large-scale emigration from Iran to Europe began after the Iranian revolution in the country in 1979 and the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s. This was followed by a migration wave after the government of the reformist President Mohammed Khatami failed to bring about a major political change.⁸ In the past ten years, Iranian emigrants have left the country for a variety of reasons. Social and religious control, the risk of persecution, the high employment rate, low wages, the lack of opportunities for scientific research and the unstable political and social situation are cited as reasons for leaving the country.⁹ Different consulted sources state that some 150,000 to 180,000 highly qualified Iranians also leave their country every year.¹⁰ Nevertheless, a large number of Iranians living abroad regularly return to Iran, mostly for family visits, to celebrate Nowruz (Persian New Year) or, for example, to give lectures as expats.¹¹ Cedoca also notes that due to the outbreak of COVID-19, a number of flights to Iran have been suspended since March 2020.¹² IranAir, the country's civil airline, announced in early March 2020 that it was suspending all flights to Europe because of "the restrictions that have been placed on [IranAir] flights by Europe for unclear reasons" according to an article of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).¹³

Different consulted sources indicate that there has been a rise in the number of Iranians applying for asylum in Europe over the past two years, in particular among unaccompanied minors.¹⁴ This may be related to the fact that Serbia offered visa-free entry to Iranians in 2017. According to an RFE/RL article, more than 15,000 Iranians have visited the country. Following allegations which demonstrated that this scheme was abused by Iranians seeking access to Western Europe to apply for asylum, Serbia ended the visa scheme on 11 October 2018.¹⁵ Figures collected by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in January 2020 show that Iran is in the top ten of international protection applications in the EU+ countries.¹⁶

⁴ Al Jazeera, 19/01/2019, [url](#)

⁵ Data collected according to the United Nations definition of a migrant: "Someone living for one year or longer in a country other than the one in which he or she was born." The figures therefore include students and temporary workers.

⁶ UNFPA, The Pew Research Center, 28/02/2018, [url](#)

⁷ Azernews, 21/10/2016, [url](#)

⁸ Al Jazeera, 19/01/2019, [url](#)

⁹ Al Jazeera, 19/01/2019, [url](#)

¹⁰ Radio Farda, 11/03/2019, [url](#); NCRI, 10/06/2018, [url](#); World Bank, 06/10/2017, [url](#)

¹¹ Teheran Times, 04/04/2018, [url](#); Eurasianet, 26/03/2018, [url](#)

¹² Reuters, 02/03/2020, [url](#)

¹³ RFE/RL, 08/03/2020, [url](#)

¹⁴ Al Jazeera, 19/01/2019, [url](#); BBC News, 26/11/2018, [url](#)

¹⁵ RFE/RL, 12/10/2018, [url](#)

¹⁶ EASO, 20/03/2020, [url](#)

According to figures from Eurostat, 560 Iranians submitted an international protection request in Belgium in 2018. In 2019, the number of international protection requests from Iranians in Belgium rose to 775.¹⁷

1.2. Monitoring in Europe and Belgium

Persons who emigrated from Iran due to problems (due to their profile or activities) are sometimes monitored by the Iranian authorities. Different consulted sources state, for example, that opposition activities on social media by Iranians living abroad are checked by the Iranian regime.¹⁸ On 9 October 2019, Cedoca had contact by telephone with Amir Rashidi, researcher at the Center for Human Rights in Iran. He pointed out the fact that Iranian authorities may monitor the online activities of activists in exile. However, he argued that this is probably only done in the case of activists with a higher profile or those who have connections with the political opposition in Iran.¹⁹ During the same telephone conversation, Cedoca also asked Rashidi whether persons are asked at the airport to disclose their social media data on their return to Iran after a stay abroad. Rashidi responded that a number of friends of his had recently returned to Iran and that he had not heard that they had been asked to disclose their social media data.²⁰

One consulted source (who wishes to remain anonymous for security reasons) claims that Iranian informants collect information about persons who convert abroad. If the Iranian authorities are interested in a specific group (in this case, for example, converts), they will find the necessary capacity to monitor these persons abroad. According to this source, it is highly likely that the Iranian government will infiltrate a community of Iranian converts in countries where Iranians convert on a large scale, such as Turkey or Greece.²¹

¹⁷ Eurostat, last update: 12/03/2020, [url](#)

¹⁸ ACCORD, 05/07/2019, [url](#); SFH, 21/01/2019, [url](#)

¹⁹ Rashidi A., conversation by telephone, 09/10/2019

²⁰ Rashidi A., conversation by telephone, 09/10/2019

²¹ Academic, Malta, 27/03/2019

2. Migration legislation

There is no law in Iranian legislation that makes applying for asylum abroad a punishable offence.²²

An illegal exit is punishable on the basis of Section 34 of Iranian criminal law. Leaving the country without a valid or personal passport can be punished with a fine, a prison sentence of two to six months or both, depending on the circumstances.²³ In actual practice, people are only given a fine for an illegal exit, as is evident from research by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS). If a person has left Iran illegally but was not wanted by the authorities, only a fine will be issued. If a person was wanted by the authorities, they will only be punished for the crime committed, but not for illegally leaving the country.²⁴ According to a source from the Dutch Ministry of the Interior, leaving the country while in possession of a valid, personal passport but without crossing a border checkpoint leads to a prison sentence of one to three months.²⁵

According to the Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2019 Iran of the US Department Of State, USDOS) dated 11 March 2020, anyone wishing to leave Iran must have an exit permit. Some nationals, such as those with skills/professions that are in high demand, or students who have studied at government expense, must pay a kind of deposit to get permission to travel abroad. This is to make sure they will return. Furthermore, the Iranian authorities do not permit important religious leaders or scientists to travel abroad without restrictions.²⁶

Male students who have not yet completed their military service in Iran must obtain special permission from their university to leave the country and pay a kind of deposit (exit security, *vasighe*) to acquire their exit permit (*khoruj az kishvar*), irrespective of whether their journey is for tourist or educational purposes. The amounts due for this security are often very high and unaffordable for the student in question. This deposit must be paid again each time a student who has not yet completed his military service wishes to leave Iran.²⁷

Married women always require permission from their husband to leave Iran, even if they are in possession of a valid passport.²⁸ Section 18 of the Passport Law, 1973 states that married women travelling abroad must submit signed permission from their husband to the Official Documents Registry.²⁹ Another source states that it is also possible to include the condition that a woman can and may travel freely and frequently without permission from the husband in a marriage contract. This article in IranWire of November 2019 does state, however, that a woman still needs her husband's permission to renew her passport, which shows that women have to be specific about what kinds of conditions they want to include in their marriage contract.³⁰ Unmarried and divorced women and widows do not require permission from their father or a male guardian.³¹ In February 2013, a legislative proposal was submitted, stating that unmarried women also need official permission from a male guardian or the father if they want to travel abroad. This proposal was abandoned after much criticism.³²

²² Government of the Netherlands-Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22/03/2019, [url](#)

²³ Government of the Netherlands-Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22/03/2019, [url](#)

²⁴ DIS, 02/2009, [url](#)

²⁵ Government of the Netherlands-Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 22/03/2019, [url](#)

²⁶ USDOS, 11/03/2020, p. 31, [url](#)

²⁷ The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (Ditto S.), 02/2014, [url](#)

²⁸ USDOS, 11/03/2020, p. 31, [url](#)

²⁹ Radio Zamaneh, 01/10/2015, [url](#); ACCORD, 12/06/2017, [url](#)

³⁰ IranWire (Gholamhosseinpour M.), 02/11/2019, [url](#)

³¹ UK Home Office, 09/2018, [url](#)

³² Al-Monitor (Samini M.), 21/02/2014, [url](#)

An application for a passport involves a detailed check of the applicant. It is investigated, for example, if the applicant has any pending court cases. A special database is used for this purpose. This database is also used at the airport for a final check.³³ A DIS report from February 2018 states that a travel ban is not automatically imposed after a judgement in a court case. Whether or not a travel ban is imposed depends on the individual case. A travel ban can be imposed in court cases related to national security or in political cases. However, in serious criminal cases, where the judgement is ruled in absentia, a travel ban will be issued automatically.³⁴

According to the same DIS report, it is virtually impossible to exit the country legally when a travel ban has been issued. Sources consulted by DIS state that border security is very strict and the borders are controlled by the army. Moreover, exiting the country illegally - using bribes - is virtually impossible as this would be very expensive and complex due to the many checks.³⁵

³³ Danish Immigration service, 02/2018, p. 8, [url](#)

³⁴ Danish Immigration service, 02/2018, p. 8, [url](#)

³⁵ Danish Immigration service, 02/2018, p. 9, [url](#)

3. Readmission agreements

Over the past few years, most European countries have experienced difficulties in sending failed asylum seekers back to Iran. In 2015, the then British Home Secretary, Theresa May, tried to persuade the Iranian authorities to recognise the rejected Iranian asylum seekers still in the UK at that time as Iranian nationals and to allow them back into the country. The official reply from the Iranian authorities was that they were not sure these were Iranian citizens and that they therefore did not want to readmit the asylum seekers.³⁶

In May 2016, the then Prime Minister of Belgium, Charles Michel, declared that he wished to discuss the issue of forced returns during the planned visit of the Iranian President, Rouhani, to Belgium. The Belgian newspaper De Standaard reported in February 2016 that Iran refused to readmit Iranian nationals who are forced to return, because they assume that each national must be free to choose where they want to live.³⁷

According to information obtained from DVZ by email on 19 March 2020, there is no return and readmission agreement with Iran (at national, Benelux or EU level).³⁸

³⁶ RT News UK, 22/01/2015, [url](#)

³⁷ De Standaard, 08/02/2016, [url](#)

³⁸ DVZ, email, 19/03/2020

4. Types of return

4.1. Voluntary return

4.1.1. Organisation and identification procedure

In November 2010, a staff member of the Belgian embassy held a meeting in Tehran with a staff member of IOM Tehran, on behalf of Cedoca.³⁹ IOM Tehran declared that the Iranian embassies facilitate the issue of a laissez-passer for travelling back to Iran. However, the Iranian embassy will always carry out a thorough investigation into the identity of the person concerned and often the family in Iran will also be contacted and will be asked to help identify the person concerned (for example by submitting a birth certificate). The situation is different, though, in the case of a forced return. According to IOM Tehran, the Iranian embassies often do not give any support or provide any documents in the case of a forced return to Iran.⁴⁰

On 13 January 2020, Cedoca contacted IOM Belgium by email for an update about the situation regarding voluntary return to Iran. IOM Belgium did not respond to this request for information from Cedoca within the timeframe of this COI Focus.

4.1.2. Relevant figures

According to information obtained by Cedoca from DVZ by email on 19 March 2020, 21 persons returned to Iran voluntarily in the period from 1 January 2019 to 31 January 2020.⁴¹

4.2. Forced return

4.2.1. Organisation and identification procedure

DVZ informed Cedoca as follows by email on 19 March 2020 about the method used to remove Iranians:

"A diplomatic, consular or other government body of a country of origin is never informed that a person has requested international protection.

Only ordinary LPs from the embassy in the case of voluntary return. According to the Iranian constitution, all Iranian nationals are free to choose where they want to live.

Only scheduled flights are possible (to Tehran; in principle also to other international airports in Iran, but this is never done by Belgium).

Because the foreign national will only board a plane in case of voluntary return – only DEPU (non-escorted foreign nationals)." [translated]⁴²

³⁹ Meeting of staff member of the Belgian embassy with IOM Tehran, in Tehran, on 24/11/2010

⁴⁰ Meeting of staff member of the Belgian embassy with IOM Tehran, in Tehran, on 24/11/2010

⁴¹ DVZ, email, 19/03/2020

⁴² DVZ, email, 19/03/2020

4.2.2. Relevant figures

According to information obtained by Cedoca from DVZ by email on 19 March 2020, not a single person was forced to return to Iran in the period from 1 January 2019 to 31 January 2020. DVZ adds to this that:

“A forced return is only possible if the person has a valid passport, as travel documents (LPs) are only issued within the context of a voluntary return.” [translated]⁴³

⁴³ DVZ, email, 19/03/2020

5. Return to the territory

This section focuses on the extent to which the Iranian authorities pay attention to a returnee during the checks carried out on arrival in the country, and this in accordance with different identifiable factors: travel documents (laissez-passer or passport), the repatriation scheme (with or without escort, with or without reception by IOM), compliance with migration legislation and the fact that the person returns from Belgium.

In August 2013, Hassan Rouhani was appointed as the new President of Iran. His appointment initially seemed to put an end to the situation where political and other opponents wished to flee the country. Many opponents abroad were considering whether returning to their native country was an option, encouraged as they were by several statements by important persons in authority at the beginning of President Rouhani's term of office.⁴⁴ According to the official Iranian news site Khabar Online, translated by the news site Al-Monitor, the Intelligence Minister Seyed Mahmoud Alavi announced during a press conference on 21 August 2013 that those who had not broken the law could return. He did not specify what he meant by this. The spokesperson of the Ministry of Justice, Mohsen Ejei, made similar statements at the time, saying that everyone who had left Iran could return, but that those who had committed crimes against the regime abroad or in Iran itself would be arrested immediately.⁴⁵

The Iranian Deputy Minister for Consular, Parliamentary and Expatriates Affairs, Hassan Qashqavi, declared at the end of 2013 that Iran had set up a committee for the return of Iranians from abroad to facilitate their return.⁴⁶ According to the Iran Times, an Iranian newspaper in Washington, he also stated at the beginning of 2014 that they possessed a list of individuals who were wanted by the authorities and therefore would encounter difficulties on their return. He said that every Iranian abroad is entitled to know whether or not they are on this list. He claimed that about 95% of all Iranians abroad would be able to return without any problems, although he did not specify the criteria on which this figure was based.⁴⁷ He urged Iranians living abroad to send an email to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, iranianaaffairs@mfa.gov.ir, to enquire about their options.⁴⁸ Other consulted sources do not mention this option.

5.1. Authorities present

Thirteen of the 320 airports in Iran support international flights. Since the end of 2007 - after the Imam Khomeini International Airport (IKI) started operating - Mehrabad Airport has only been used for domestic flights and flights for pilgrims. Most international flights arrive at IKI Airport in Tehran.⁴⁹ According to DVZ, only scheduled flights are possible when returning to Tehran. Returning is in principle also possible via other international airports in Iran, but this never happens from Belgium.⁵⁰ For that reason, Cedoca only discusses returning via Tehran airport in this COI Focus.

⁴⁴ Arseh Sevom (Majidzadeh P.), 19/11/2013, [url](#)

⁴⁵ Al-Monitor, Iran Pulse (Karami A.), 22/08/2013, [url](#)

⁴⁶ Article 19 (Bayani A.), 15/05/2014, [url](#)

⁴⁷ Iran Times, 21/02/2014,

⁴⁸ Global Voices (Alimardani M.), 15/05/2014, [url](#)

⁴⁹ 1stQuest, 21/08/2019, [url](#)

⁵⁰ DVZ, email, 19/03/2020

The following Iranian authorities are present at IKI Airport in Tehran: the Anti-Narcotics Police (ANP), Airport Police, Immigration and Passport Police and the Ministry of Interior and Customs Administration.⁵¹

5.2. Procedures on arrival

On arrival at IKI Airport in Tehran, there are various waiting areas for foreigners and Iranians. The passports are inspected and it is also checked whether returning individuals have any pending court cases against them.⁵² According to a report by the Schweizerische Flüchtlingshilfe (SFH), political activists are identified at the airport when returning from abroad by means of methods such as photographic screening and interrogation by the authorities on arrival.⁵³

DVZ is not aware of any further checks when returning. In the case of a voluntary return and if the person needs an LP, family or acquaintances from Iran must confirm that the person is an Iranian national. This information is then forwarded to the embassy via the national authorities, on the basis of which an LP is provided. Individuals who apply for an LP are also interviewed by the embassy.⁵⁴

5.3. Overview of reported problems

There are two groups of failed asylum seekers. On the one hand, there is the group who return to Iran voluntarily. They can appeal to IOM for this purpose. The other group is the group who do not wish to return voluntarily, which may involve a forced return. The situation is different in the case of a forced return. According to IOM Tehran, the Iranian embassies often do not give any support or provide any documents in the case of a forced return to Iran.⁵⁵

As there are very few failed asylum seekers (see [4.2. Forced return](#)) who are forcibly returned to Iran, there is very little data available about this group of people. In the past reporting period, no information was found in the consulted sources used in this COI Focus about asylum seekers rejected by Belgium who experienced problems with the Iranian authorities after returning to Iran. DVZ states the following in an email to Cedoca on 19 March 2020 about possible problems when returning:

“DVZ does not have such information. As the foreign national returns voluntarily, no problems have been reported.” [translated]⁵⁶

Specific investigations by Cedoca in the sources that report on arrests in Iran regarding the return of failed asylum seekers to Iran from Europe did not yield any results either. Only the arrests of Diya Sawari and Fatemeh Azad could be classified as such.

In the case of Diya Sawari, various organisations campaigning for the Iranian Arabs in Khuzestan reported in March 2017 on the six-year prison sentence he was given. Sawari was an asylum seeker in the Netherlands from the Iranian city of Ahwaz who, according to the sources campaigning for the Ahwazi, was forced to return in March 2016. Before his departure to the Netherlands he had taken part in several demonstrations, and in the Netherlands he had been in contact with the opposition group the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA). After his arrival in Iran he was arrested by the security services. He was sentenced by the revolutionary court for his membership of ASMLA and for undermining national security.⁵⁷ Upon enquiries made by Cedoca, the Dutch

⁵¹ UNODC, 19/11/2019, [url](#)

⁵² Upper Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber), 04/07/2016, [url](#)

⁵³ SFH, 25/04/2019, p. 17, [url](#)

⁵⁴ DVZ, email, 19/03/2020

⁵⁵ Meeting of staff member of the Belgian embassy with IOM Tehran, in Tehran, on 24/11/2010

⁵⁶ DVZ, email, 19/03/2020

⁵⁷ Ahwaz Monitor, 04/03/2017, [url](#)

authorities stated that the person in question returned with IOM voluntarily.⁵⁸ Cedoca has not found any further information about his arrest. The news of his arrest was not mentioned in other media (not focusing on Ahwaz) either. However, the circumstances of this arrest are unclear, and the return from the Netherlands was said to be voluntary.

In the case of Fatemeh Azad, International Christian Concern reported on 25 July 2019 that her asylum application had been turned down in Germany. She was deported to Iran, following which - according to German newspapers - she was met at Tehran airport by Iranian officials who arrested her. Meanwhile, she has been released on bail and is currently awaiting trial. Fatemeh Azad's asylum application is based on the fact that she converted to Christianity against her husband's will. The consulted source does not clarify the reason for her arrest.⁵⁹

The DFAT report of June 2018 states the following about returning to Iran after a rejected asylum application:

"According to international observers, Iranian authorities pay little attention to failed asylum seekers on their return to Iran. Iranians have left the country in large numbers since the 1979 revolution, and authorities accept that many will seek to live and work overseas for economic reasons. International observers report that Iranian authorities have little interest in prosecuting failed asylum seekers for activities conducted outside Iran, including in relation to protection claims. This includes posting social media comments critical of the government - heavy internet filtering means most Iranians will never see them - converting to Christianity, or engaging in LGBTI activities. In such cases the risk profile for the individual will be the same as for any other person in Iran within that category. Those with an existing high profile may face a higher risk of coming to official attention on return to Iran, particularly political activists."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Expert at the Dutch asylum authority, email, 13/04/2017

⁵⁹ International Christian Concern, 25/07/2019, [url](#)

⁶⁰ DFAT, 07/06/2018, p. 49, [url](#)

6. Follow-up actions in the territory

6.1. Support programmes

According to DVZ, the only programme is the generic Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme, which is supported via Fedasil. There is no specific programme for Iranian asylum seekers rejected by Belgium.⁶¹ In the past reporting period, no further information was found in the consulted sources about support programmes for failed asylum seekers.

6.2. Overview of reported problems

In the past reporting period, no information was found in the consulted sources about failed asylum seekers who experienced problems with the Iranian authorities after returning to Iran.

⁶¹ DVZ, email, 19/03/2020

Summary

Over the past ten years, Iranian emigrants have left their country for different reasons: social and religious control, risk of persecution, the high unemployment rate, low wages, a lack of opportunities for scientific research and the unstable political and social situation. According to several sources, the Iranian authorities sometimes monitor the activities of Iranians abroad.

The consulted sources indicate that the number of requests for international protection among Iranians in Europe has increased over the past two years. Figures collected by EASO in January 2020 show that Iran is in the top ten of requests for international protection in the EU+ countries. According to figures from Eurostat, 560 Iranians submitted an international protection request in Belgium in 2018, and in 2019 this number rose to 775.

Information from DVZ reveals that 21 persons returned to Iran voluntarily in the period from 1 January 2019 to 31 January 2020. Figures from DVZ show that in the same reporting period, no forced returns to Iran were organised by the Belgian authorities.

There is no law in Iranian legislation that makes applying for asylum abroad a punishable offence. An illegal exit is punishable on the basis of Section 34 of Iranian criminal law. According to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, leaving the country without a valid or personal passport can be punished with a fine, a prison sentence of two to six months or both, depending on the circumstances. There is no return and readmission agreement with Iran at national, Benelux or EU level.

After taking office in August 2013, the moderate President Rouhani created an atmosphere of optimism among many Iranians abroad regarding a possible permanent return to Iran. He made it clear that the authorities encouraged such a return and considered this desirable. No information was found which indicates that failed asylum seekers form a risk group on their return to Iran. The DFAT report states that, according to international observers, Iran pays little attention to failed asylum seekers returning to Iran. DVZ is not aware of any difficulties or human rights violations on returning to Iran during the reporting period of this COI Focus either.

Cedoca has not found any information about further monitoring of failed asylum seekers in the territory within the timeframe of this COI Focus. According to DVZ, the only programme for returnees that exists is the generic AVRR programme, which is supported via Fedasil.

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