

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

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21 October 2013

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Iran: Exit and entry procedures at airports and land borders, particularly at the Imam Khomeini International airport; whether authorities alert border officials of individuals they are looking for; incidence of bribery of Iranian border officials to facilitate departure; the punishment for border officers caught taking such bribes (2009-October 2013)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Entry and Exit Procedures

1.1 Entry and Exit Procedures at the Imam Khomeini International Airport

According to an April 2009 Danish Immigration Service fact-finding mission report, the Imam Khomeini International airport is the main airport for international flights in Iran, while Mehrabad airport is now used for domestic flights, exceptional international "VIP" flights and "pilgrims travelling on pilgrimage" (Denmark Apr. 2009, 39-40). The website of the Iranian Alale Aseman Abi Tourism and Travel Agency also indicates that international flights, with the exception of Hajj pilgrimage flights, have moved from the Mehrabad airport to the Imam Khomeini International Airport (n.d.). The website of the Ghasran Gasht Travel & Tour Agency also notes that international flights are through Khomeini, while Mehrabad is now used for regional and cargo flights (n.d.).

The 2009 Danish Immigration Service report provides the following information on security procedures upon arrival at Khomeini International airport:

After leaving the aircraft the person enters an area with counters for passport checks. There are separate counters for foreigners and Iranians. The Immigration Police who are sitting inside a booth behind a glass window conduct this security check. The Immigration Officer scans the passport and registers all the personal data from the passport of the arriving passenger in the computer system. The personal information is already registered in the computer system. The information includes a photograph of the passport holder and this photograph appears on the screen. The Immigration Officer checks the validity of the passport and if the person is entering Iran on illegal grounds or has outstanding issues with the authorities he will be held responsible in accordance to Iranian law, rules and regulations.

If the passport cannot be scanned by the computer system, the Immigration Officer will enter the passport number manually. The airport representative mentioned that this is in particular a problem with Afghan passports. (Denmark Apr. 2009, 41)

In addition, the report states that according to the Immigration Police officer in charge of passport border control at Khomeini airport, despite the age of the computer system, it "has been able to identify forged visas, passports and other documents" (ibid.).

An article dated 8 February 2010 in the *Christian Science Monitor* quoted a Washington-based expert on Iran as stating that individuals whose names are on the watchlist [issued by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and the Revolutionary Guard] are generally granted entry into Iran, however their movements are monitored in the country and they are arrested at the airport upon their departure. Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The April 2009 Danish Immigration Service report provides the following information on the security procedures at Khomeini International airport upon departure, gathered during a tour of the airport led by the Immigration Police:

The first security check takes place upon entry from the public area into the terminal area for travellers only. The passenger's luggage will be checked at this point. The luggage goes through a scanner and if anything looks suspicious, the Immigration Police will take the person aside and open the suitcase. The passport of the person travelling is checked and the person passes through a detector (women and men go through separate detectors). This check is the responsibility of the Immigration Police.

After passing through the luggage check the passenger goes to the check-in counter. At the check-in counter, flight personnel will check in the passenger's luggage, check the visa and issue a boarding pass. If anything is wrong in terms of visa or passport, the flight personnel will contact the Immigration Police.

After check-in, the passenger goes to a counter where Immigration Police conducts a third security check. The Immigration Officer sits inside a booth behind a glass window. He checks the passport and personal information on a computer system.

The passport and the exit visa are verified. The data of the passport holder appears on the screen, together with a photograph of the traveller. If the person is married and has children, the photos and names of his wife and children will also appear on the screen. If the passport holder is registered on a list of individuals who have an outstanding issue with the government or for other reasons are not allowed to leave Iran, this information will appear on the screen.

When the security check is completed, and if the person is allowed to leave Iran, an exit stamp will be stamped in the passport. The person travelling now enters the duty free zone.

Before entering the area with flight gates, yet another security check is conducted. This is a physical check where the hand luggage is scanned and the passenger goes through a metal detector. This security check is conducted by the Revolutionary Guards. The Immigration Police and airline personnel conducted the previous checks.

The very last check is done just before boarding, where the traveller shows his or her boarding pass. Airport personnel conduct this check.

On the tour through the checks, [the Immigration Police officer in charge of passport border control at Khomeini airport] pointed to the fact that a staircase guarded by an airport official separates the airport's arrival and departure areas. However, the delegation noticed upon departure from Iran, that no one was guarding the staircase. Which means that a person who may, for whatever reason not want to travel or enter the last check done by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, can enter the arrival area if the staircase is not guarded at the time. (Denmark Apr. 2009, 40)

The February 2013 report of a joint fact-finding mission to Iran, Turkey and the United Kingdom by the Danish Immigration Service, Norwegian LandInfo, and Danish Refugee Council stated that, according to an employee of a Western embassy,

the airport authorities and the airlines conduct separate document checks of both passport and visa. However, what the check conducted by the airline more specifically involves, very much depends on the airline. Regarding the authorities' check of the visa, the source found that this was of no use as they are not competent in this regard. (67)

According to the article in the *Christian Science Monitor*,

while several prominent journalists and human rights activists have been detained at the airport, a surprisingly large number believed to be on government watchlists have slipped through, thanks to bureaucratic delays and also because Tehran's new airport may not be integrated into the country's security network. (8 Feb. 2010)

The article further states that

[p]assengers entering and leaving [Iran] are checked against two watchlists issued by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and the Revolutionary Guard. Those flagged are either arrested on the spot,

allowed to pass through and surveilled while in the country, or have their passports confiscated and enter Iran on the condition they attend interrogation sessions at MOIS offices. (*Christian Science Monitor* 8 Feb. 2010)

Sources citing Iranian media reports indicate that the Oscar winning filmmaker Asghar Farhadi had his passport briefly confiscated at the Khomeini airport upon his return to Iran on 9 July 2013 (Radio Zamaneh 10 July 2013; Trend News Agency 10 July 2013). It was reported that Farhadi would have to appear before the Iranian authorities to provide "explanations" (ibid.). Further information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The *Christian Science Monitor* article also reported that a "former regime insider" stated that the MOIS lists are updated manually every 12 hours, which allows a window of time for a "fugitive" to slip through (8 Feb. 2010). The article further noted that officers manually typed names and passport codes into their computers, but it was unknown whether the cameras at the Khomeini airport were equipped with facial recognition software or if the airport had the equipment to read passports by machine (*The Christian Science Monitor* 8 Feb. 2010). In addition, the authorities could be alerted to the presence of a person of interest by a tracked cell phone once it is inside the cell phone tower coverage area for the airport, or a "spotter" who "keep[s] watch for up to 200 suspects whose pictures they memorize[d]" (ibid.).

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) travel centre notes that there is an exit tax for Iranian nationals residing in Iran, known as an "airport embarkation tax," of IRR 550,000 [approximately C\$ 23 (XE 16 Oct. 2013)] payable at any Meli Bank (n.d.). The website of the Ghasran Gasht Travel & Tour Agency notes that neither the Mehrabad nor the Khomeini airports charge foreign travellers an exit fee (n.d.). However, according to the website, foreign travellers are required to pay an exit fee when they leave Iran "by land or by sea" (Ghasran Gasht Travel & Tour Agency n.d.). The US Department of State's *Country Specific Information on Iran* indicates that while US citizens in Iran on permanent resident visas must pay an exit tax and obtain an exit permit each time they leave Iran, US-Iran dual citizens no longer have to pay an exit tax, no matter the length of their stay in Iran (US 10 Sept. 2013).

1.2 Turkish-Iranian Border

Sources indicate that there are three border crossings along the Turkish-Iranian Border: Gürbulak Border Gate in Agri, Esendere Border Gate in Hakkari and Kapıköy Border Gate in Van (Danish Immigration Service, Norwegian LandInfo, and Danish Refugee Council Feb. 2013, 74; *Hurriyet Daily News* 17 Apr. 2011). The February 2013 joint fact-finding mission report notes that there is no visa requirement between Iran and Turkey and that each year, around two million Iranians visit Turkey, most travelling "in a legal manner" across the recognized border gates (Danish Immigration Service, Norwegian LandInfo, and Danish Refugee Council Feb. 2013, 74). The US Department of State's *Country Specific Information on Iran* also indicates that a visa is not required for Iranian nationals travelling to Turkey (10 Sept. 2013).

With regard to security measures at the Turkish-Iranian Border, the February 2013 joint fact-finding mission report provided the following information:

... Agreements of cooperation in the border areas exist between the Iranian and Turkish authorities regarding issues of security, trade and everyday life, but the regulations are not always followed. It was added that approximately two years ago, security controls of the border regions between Iran and Turkey were intensified in order to combat PKK and PJAK activity. Concerns over security led the Iranian government at that time to increase the presence of the Revolutionary Guard in these areas.

...

Regarding the authorities' activity in the Kurdish border areas with Turkey, a Western embassy ... stated that the security forces are mobilized to a much higher extent than in other areas. To illustrate this, the source added that on the prospect of unrest and demonstrations in Tehran, the security forces from the Kurdish area are called on to assist. The source added that Iran has an agreement with Turkey regarding a crack-down on PKK/PJAK activities, however there is nevertheless traffic across the border and there are parts of it that the authorities are unable to control effectively.

The source further said that it is impossible to control the border areas in the Kurdish region and that traditionally, Kurdish families living on both sides of the border have travelled back and forth across the border for hundreds of years. It was considered that not all border crossings would be something the Iranian government is equally concerned about.

Concerning the situation in the Van border area to Iran, representatives from two [h]uman [r]ights [o]rganizations in Turkey stated that the pushing back of refugees over the border still occurred. It used to be a big problem, however, due to the efforts from NGOs and lawyers who have brought these cases before the European Court of Human Rights, the numbers of push-backs have decreased. (Danish Immigration Service, Norwegian LandInfo, and Danish Refugee Council Feb. 2013, 75).

The report stated that according to the International Organization for Migration in Ankara, Turkey, approximately 700 "illegal" Iranian migrants were apprehended in 2012 (ibid., 74). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Information on the nature of the security procedures at the Turkish-Iranian border could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Exit Permits and Exit Stamps

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2012* indicates that all Iranian citizens need an exit permit for foreign travel (US 19 Apr. 2013, 32). Iranian travel agencies also note that exit permits are required by all and are often included with the visa (Revealing Persia n.d.; Ghods Gasht n.d.). *Country Reports 2012* stated that "[s]ome citizens, particularly those whose skills were in demand and who were educated at government expense, had to post bond to obtain an exit permit" (US 19 Apr. 2013, 32). According to the website of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a multiple exit permit is for Iranians residing abroad that are not under military obligation (Iran n.d.a). The website of the Iranian Embassy in the Netherlands indicates that "Iranians that are obligated to do military service, who have been living abroad for at least 2 years, and who have exited the country before 29 Esfand 1382 (19/03/2004), can apply for a single-exit-per-year permit (exit stamp for the service-obligated)" (Iran n.d.b).

The website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs notes that as of 22 November 2007, "entry and departure stamps are no longer imprinted in passports" (Iran n.d.a). Similarly, the Department of State's *Country Specific Information on Iran* states that exit stamps are no longer inserted into passports (US 10 Sept. 2013).

However, an article dated 1 August 2012 on the website of International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, a non-profit organization founded in 2008 and based in New York (n.d.), reported that an Iranian lawyer who represented three Americans charged with illegal entry into Iran received an exit stamp on his passport while at the airport on 2 October 2011 (International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran 1 Aug. 2012). According to the article, after the lawyer received the exit stamp, he was prevented from boarding his flight and his passport was confiscated (ibid.). An article, dated 10 May 2013 and also on the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran website reproduces the full text of an open letter written by the lawyer to the Iranian authorities, wherein the lawyer states that his "passport, stamped with an exit permit, has been confiscated for nearly 600 days without any judicial orders or legal rulings."

3. Permission to Travel

Sources note that unless exempt, military service in Iran is mandatory for males aged 18-34, including dual citizens, even those born abroad (US 10 Sept. 2013; Canada 12 Aug. 2013). Young men seventeen years of age will be prevented from leaving Iran until they have completed their military service (US 10 Sept. 2013; Canada 12 Aug. 2013).

Married women require the permission of their husbands to leave Iran (US 10 Sept. 2013; Canada 12 Aug. 2013; UN 28 Feb. 2013, para. 47). In the case of a divorce, if the mother has been granted custody of children, the paternal grandfather's permission is required for children under 18 years of age to leave Iran (US 10 Sept. 2013; Canada 12 Aug. 2013).

A report by the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre (IHRDC) on the Iranian government's attempts to silence the women's rights movement in Iran leading up to the 2009 election, states that according to Article 133 of Iran's Procedures for Criminal Prosecution, individuals can be prohibited from traveling abroad "only if an active prosecution case is underway" (n.d.). The report adds that Article 16 of the Iranian Passport Law allows a judicial official to prohibit the departure of an individual from Iran (IHRDC n.d.). The report also quoted an Iranian attorney who represents people banned from leaving Iran as stating that "[p]olitical and human rights activists, artists, writers and other civil activists ... have been exit banned. However, no reason or reasons for their exit ban has so far been issued to them," and that in there were "no judge's orders putting the ban in place" (ibid.). The report also noted that activists have had their passports confiscated at the airport by Iranian authorities (ibid.). Further and corroborating information on laws regulating travel bans and their implementation could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Additional Reports of Incidents Relating to Exit and Entry into Iran

Sources reported the following problems encountered by individuals regarding entry and exit into Iran:

- Canadians whose passports contained "(a) an Israeli visa; (b) an Israeli border stamp; or (c) an Egyptian or Jordanian border stamp issued by an office bordering Israel" were denied entry into Iran (Canada 12 Aug. 2013);
- Two US nationals were sentenced to eight years in prison for charges including "illegal entry" into Iran (RFE/RL 20 Aug. 2011; ISNA 21 Sept. 2011).
- Dual citizenship is not recognized by the Iranian government and the Iranian authorities have confiscated the non-Iranian passport of dual citizens (US 10 Sept. 2013; Canada 12 Aug. 2013).
- Foreigners working in Iran have had their passports seized and their departure blocked over "tax/commercial disputes" (US 10 Sept. 2013);
- American academics, scientists, journalists in Iran for personal, cultural, and/or business reasons have been prevented from leaving, and in some cases, detained, interrogated, and imprisoned on "unknown or various charges" (ibid.);
- Activists, including women's rights activists, have been "arrested, detained and given prison sentences and had travel bans imposed" (UN 7 May 2013, para. 24);
- There were reports of Iranians receiving prison sentences for charges including "illegal" exit from Iran (UN 6 Mar. 2012, Table III; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran 10 Apr. 2013; IHRDC 11 Apr. 2012);
- "journalists, academics, opposition politicians, and activists--including women's rights activists--for travel bans and passport confiscation during the year" (US 19 Apr. 2013, 32);
- Foreign travel was restricted for the following individuals: "some religious leaders, members of religious minorities, and scientists in sensitive fields" (US 19 Apr. 2013, 32);
- Family members of journalists have been harassed and intimidated, including having had their passports confiscated (UN 28 Feb. 2013, para. 18);
- The husband and daughter of an Iranian human rights activist had a travel ban imposed on them (ibid. para. 24; US 19 Apr. 2013, 32).

5. Fraudulent Documents, Bribery and Punishment of Border Officials

According to sources cited in the February 2013 fact-finding report, it is possible to both purchase fraudulent documents and obtain legal documents fraudulently [identity documents, visas] in Iran (Danish Immigration Service, Norwegian LandInfo, and Danish Refugee Council Feb. 2013, 68). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The February 2013 fact-finding report provided conflicting information from sources on the use of forged documents and bribery to leave Iran:

According to an employee of a Western embassy (5), it would not be possible to pass the airport authorities at the Imam Khomeini International Airport without sufficient documentation, at least not without their knowledge. He stated that according to his knowledge, most Iranians who end up as illegal migrants have left Iran with their original documents. The source explained that this happens either by obtaining a genuine visa to a certain country or by obtaining a forged visa. Additionally, many travel to Turkey where there is no visa requirement for Iranians and from there travel onwards using forged documents. It was added that a lot of visa cheating is taking place in the form of forged visas or visas obtained through false information. The source did not consider it possible to exit the Imam Khomeini International Airport with a forged passport, but would not rule out the possibility of a person being able to bribe his way out of the airport - though the price would probably be high. The source indicated that the price could be as high as 8-10,000 Euros. It was added that the source considered that the right connections were also important if one was to bribe one's way out of the airport. When asked if an average Iranian could pay the necessary bribe, the employee commented that, "Everybody has connections in Iran". The source indicated that many illegal Iranian migrants abroad have left Iran using original national passports but there were also examples of people having left on foreign forged passports.

...

Concerning the issue of bribery in Imam Khomeini International Airport, a Western embassy (1) stated that there are easier ways to leave Iran illegally and pointed to the land border with Turkey. The source explained that security measures are efficient and air lines are strict on control of documents, but added that anything is possible in Iran. The embassy would not rule out that a person could bribe his way out of the airport in Iran.

The possibility of bribing one's way through the airport was rejected by a well-educated Iranian woman with links to international communities, referring to the very strict security. It was considered that this would be extremely difficult. ...

On the issue of leaving Iran by use of bribery, AIIS [Amnesty International's International Secretariat] referred to one case it had heard of after 2009, in which a woman was able to leave the airport through paying 10,000

USD in advance. It was added that the borders to Turkey and Iraq are porous and there are well-established smugglers' routes. Many people have been able to leave the country illegally. (Danish Immigration Service, Norwegian LandInfo, and Danish Refugee Council Feb. 2013, 67)

Further and corroborating information on ability to exit Iran with fraudulent documents or through bribery could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The British news site the *Daily Mail Online* reported on 29 January 2008 that four individuals employed by the Mehrabad airport as customs officials were sentenced to death for receiving a bribe of more than 10 billion rials [approximately C\$ 411 920 (XE 18 Oct. 2013)]. According to the article, one of the men was executed. An article on bribery in Iran dated 9 June 2013 on IranWire, a "joint venture by a group of journalists in the Diaspora" (n.d.), indicated that one man was hanged and three others sentenced to death for bribery in 2008. According to the article the four men worked for the Mehrabad airport (IranWire 9 June 2013). The article also indicates that the punishment for bribery in Iran law "includes cash fines, flogging, and long prison terms" (ibid.)

Further information on the punishment for border officers caught taking bribes under Iranian law and on the implementation of the law could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Oral sources: Attempts to contact the following organizations were unsuccessful: International Organization for Migration; Imam Khomeini International Airport.

Internet sites, including: Al Jazeera; Defenders of Human Rights Centre; eoi.net; Factiva; Global Integrity; Imam Khomeini International Airport; Iran – Interests Section of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the Embassy of Pakistan in the United States; Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration; Iran Air; Iran Pulse; Transparency International; United Kingdom – Home Office; United Nations – Refworld, UNHCR; United States – Congressional Research Service, Federal Aviation Administration.

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