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6 November 2013

IRN104640.E

Iran: Situation and treatment of practitioners of Interuniversalism (Erfan Halgheh) (2010-October 2013)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Interuniversalism

1.1 Overview

Interuniversalism [also known in Persian as *Erfan-e Halgheh*, *Erfan(e) Halgheh*, *Erfan-e Halqeh*, *Erfan-e Kayhani* or *Erfan Kaihan*] is also known as "Interuniversal Mysticism" (Interuniversalism Inc. n.d.), "Mysticism of the Ring" (Doostdar Apr. 2012, 130) or "Cosmic Mysticism" (IOPHRI 12 Aug. 2013; Doostdar Apr. 2012, 130). Sources describe Interuniversalism as "a spiritual doctrine" (Interuniversalism UK n.d.), "a mystical outlook" (Interuniversalism Inc. n.d.), a "mysticism" (Doostdar Apr. 2012, 130), a "philosophy" (MEHR 27 Oct. 2013) and "a school of thought" or "belief structure" (Senior Researcher 28 Oct. 2013). It originated in Iran (Interuniversalism Inc. n.d.).

Sources indicate that Interuniversalism was founded by Mohammad Ali Taheri (Doostdar Apr. 2012, 131; MEHR 27 Oct. 2013), who claimed that in 1978, he "received divine inspirations" (MEHR 27 Oct. 2013). In a doctoral dissertation written for Harvard University on the perceptions of the supernatural among members of the urban middle class in Tehran, Alireza Doostdar writes that Taheri claimed he "received" knowledge of Interuniversalism after profound questioning of existence and that "at the peak of his career in 2008, [Taheri] oversaw an impressive network of seminars and informal 'therapy clinics' spread across urban centers in Iran and beyond" (Apr. 2012, 131-133).

1.2 Beliefs

The website of Interuniversalism UK, which declares itself the "official website of Erfan Halgheh Community in the UK," states that Interuniversalism

is based on connection with the intelligence which governs the universe. This connection is via "circles" which act like spiritual tools. Each Circle has a defined purpose, and does something unique. (Interuniversalism UK n.d.)

The website of California-based Interuniversalism Inc., which describes itself as a legally registered non-profit organization, states the following:

Interuniversal Mysticism is a mystical outlook ... its insights conform to the framework of Iranian Sufism (mysticism). Interuniversal Mysticism examines the mystical concepts both in theory and in practice, relating to all human beings; therefore everybody regardless of their race, nationality, religion and personal beliefs, can conceive and accept its theories and benefit from its practical aspects.

The practical aspect of Erfan (Mysticism) is based on establishing a link to the several circles (Halgheh) of the "Cosmic Consciousness," through which an entire pathway of exploration and transformation is opened, and will be applicable in daily life. (Interuniversalism Inc. n.d.)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a lawyer working for the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, a US-based independent NGO founded in 2004 by human rights scholars and lawyers that monitors the human rights situation in Iran (IHRDC n.d.), answered some questions based on an interview conducted with a practitioner of Interuniversalism. The lawyer stated that, according to the practitioner,

adherents to Interuniversalism believe that there is a qualitative aspect to the universe and a quantitative aspect, and that they are concerned with the former. Furthermore, he added that they believe that much of existence is connected to things 'that happen behind the curtain' and that Interuniversalism is the way to opening that curtain. (IHRDC 25 Oct. 2013)

The lawyer indicated that the practitioner he interviewed stressed that Interuniversalism "is not seen by its adherents as a contradiction of any traditional faiths" (ibid.). However, Doostdar notes that while "Taheri has avoided making a direct link between his receptions and the divine revelations of the prophets nothing in his writing or his teachings warrant making a distinction between the two" and that "[s]ome of his followers ... consider him to be nothing less than a prophet" (Apr. 2012, 133).

1.2.1 Faradarmani and Psymontology

Sources state that two subsidiary belief systems or philosophies, *faradarmani* and *psymontology*, which are described as therapeutic or healing practices, exist within Interuniversalism (Senior Researcher 28 Oct. 2013; IHRDC 25 Oct. 2013; Doostdar Apr. 2012, 133). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a senior researcher at the Human Rights in Iran Unit of the City University of New York's Brooklyn College (Senior Researcher 5 Nov. 2013) stated that "Faradamani and Psymontology are attempts at housing some of [Taheri's] ideas in a scientific framework" (ibid. 28 Oct. 2013).

The lawyer for the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center stated that faradarmani "seems to focus on prayer or some sort of meditation or consciousness as a mean of obtaining wellness" and involves "the rejection of modern medicine" (IHRDC 25 Oct. 2013). According to Doostdar, Taheri describes psymontology as "a 'meta-holistic science of the mind and psyche'" (Apr. 2012, 133).

1.3 Structure

The Senior Researcher stated that Taheri "is seen as the formal leader" of followers of Interuniversalism (Senior Researcher 28 Oct. 2013). He added that

[m]uch of the formal structure for [Interuniversalism] has been established [by] followers outside Iran, with Taheri's blessing but absent his day to day management. Taheri has tried to establish academic institutes outside Iran also to study his healing practices. (ibid.)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Director of Interuniversalism UK provided the following details about the structure of the group outside of Iran:

At the present there are two active established organizations, which are well-known. One is Interuniversalism Inc. in the USA (www.interuniversalism.us) and the other is Interuniversal LTD in the UK (www.erfanhalghe.co.uk), [which] is more commonly known as [the] Erfan Halghe Community in the UK.

[...]

The Director of Interuniversalism Inc. is Mrs. Shahnaz Niroomanesh. [...] Mrs. Niroomanesh has been one of the close students of Mohammad Ali Taheri and was one of the managers in the initial organization formed by Mohammad Ali Taheri himself.

The Director of Interuniversal LTD added that "I am in close contact with Mrs. Niroomanesh; however the two companies are not officially partners due to legal processes" (30 Oct. 2013).

The lawyer at IHRDC stated that he understood that

all of the information regarding the beliefs to which the group adheres is not made available at once, and that an enthusiast has to undergo a process in order to obtain that information. Based on the witness' own experience, I believe that an adherent to Interuniversalism is made a 'coach' or teacher after a few years. His testimony did not indicate the existence of any hierarchy beyond that. (IHRDC 25 Oct. 2013) The Director of Interuniversalism UK similarly stated that Interuniversalism has eight main courses and three supplemental

courses that people "could attend" (Interuniversalism UK 30 Oct. 2013). After followers finish the fifth course, they can "apply to be trainer[s] to teach the courses to others" (ibid.).

1.4 Geographic Presence and Number of Adherents

According to sources, the group is active in Tehran, as well as in other cities in Iran (Senior Researcher 28 Oct. 2013; IHRDC 25 Oct. 2013; Doostdar Apr. 2012, 132).

The Director of Interuniversalism UK stated that

[d]ue to the success rate of Faradarmani, huge number of people from all around Iran became interested to try and learn Interuniversalism. The last statistics which goes back to 3 years ago and was announced by Master Taheri ... shows around 2-3 million followers and around 500,000 trainers across Iran. (30 Oct. 2013)

Sources indicate that the group is also present outside of Iran (Senior Researcher 28 Oct. 2013; IHRDC 25 Oct. 2013; Doostdar Apr. 2012, 132-133). Doostdar reports that representatives of Interuniversalism are found in Malaysia, Turkey, Germany, Dubai, the US, Australia, Canada, Austria, the UK and Switzerland but that "accurate numbers of [Taheri's] followers are impossible to determine" (Doostdar Apr. 2012, 132). The Interuniversalism UK Director likewise states that "there is no statistical data which shows the number of followers and trainers," but that "it can be estimated that there are around 10 million followers and 1 million trainer[s] across the globe" (30 Oct. 2013). The website of Interuniversalism Inc. claims that "there are millions of people who are familiar with and users of [Interuniversalism's] practical applications" and that "about" 20,000 people worldwide serve as "trainers" of its concepts (n.d.).

The Senior Researcher at the Human Rights in Iran Unit indicated that the number of practitioners of Interuniversalism has increased (28 Oct. 2013). As an example of the group's "widespread" popularity and "the strength of [Taheri's] appeal," Doostdar reports that "one of the founding texts of Cosmic Mysticism went into eight reprints between 2007 and 2009, for a total of 90,000 prints" (Apr. 2012, 132).

1.5 Activities

According to the Senior Researcher, practitioners of Interuniversalism promote Taheri's work both in and out of Iran, including through websites, the publication and distribution of his written works, by holding "healing sessions" and by teaching healing methods (28 Oct. 2013). Doostdar also notes that the group holds seminars and "informal 'therapy clinics'" (Apr. 2012, 131). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the President of the California-based Mission for the Establishment of Human Rights in Iran (MEHR), "a network of individuals committed to strengthening advocacy on human rights situation in Iran" (MEHR n.d.), also stated that "[t]here are several websites that promote Taheri's ideas and mostly seem to be outside Iran" (ibid. 27 Oct. 2013).

2. Situation and Treatment of Practitioners of Interuniversalism

2.1 General Treatment by Society

According to the Director of Interuniversalism UK,

the common attitude towards Interuniversalism is very positive, however it is considered dangerous, and people in Iran follow the activities secretly. It is also observed that people do not tend to provide their real name when [they] are talking about this doctrine, even if they are in a foreign country. (30 Oct. 2013)

The Senior Researcher said that in Iran,

[m]any conservative pro-government Muslim[s] have a negative view of new and alternative spiritual practices and have a documented history of violence towards these religious groups. Local clerics sometimes incite this violence. I do not know if this violence has been directed at Interuniversalism. (28 Oct. 2013)

Some sources report that some religious authorities have specifically denounced Interuniversalism (MEHR 27 Oct. 2013; Doostdar Apr. 2012, 130). Doostdar reports that condemnation of the group has come from state-affiliated Shi'i authorities (Apr. 2012, 130). According to the lawyer at IHRDC, "[o]ne cleric, Hamidreza Mazaheri Seif, repeatedly called for the group to be shut down and its members arrested due to the unorthodox nature of their beliefs" (25 Oct. 2013).

Sources note that there have been negative depictions of Interuniversalism in state media (Senior Researcher 28 Oct. 2013; Doostdar Apr. 2012, 130). The Senior Researcher indicated that "Iranian newspapers also often publish disparaging articles about Interuniversalism, its members and Taheri" (Senior Researcher 28 Oct. 2013).

2.2 Treatment by Authorities

According to the Senior Researcher, "[t]he [s]tate and state officials think of Interuniversalism as a cult and a ... scam" (ibid.). The Director of Interuniversalism UK stated that a bill that aims to ban "Interuniversalism Mysticism" in Iran and stipulates punishments for "anyone attending, promoting and managing 'fake spiritual doctrine'" has been drafted; however, he added that the bill "has not reached the parliament open session" yet (Interuniversalism UK 30 Oct. 2013; ibid. 5 Nov. 2013). The Director added that "fake spiritual doctrines" are "defined as non-Islamic doctrines, and the government agencies have explicitly characterised Interuniversalism as a 'fake spiritual doctrine'" (ibid. 30 Oct. 2013).

Further details on this ban or corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate

The Director of Interuniversalism UK further stated that "[a]round 3-4 years ago the Iranian authorities started to act against the followers and trainers of Interuniversalism, especially Master Mohammad Ali Taheri," adding that "[t]hese actions have become more serious from the third detention of Master Mohammad Ali Taheri" (ibid.).

The lawyer at IHRDC reported that Taheri has been arrested "multiple times," and added that according to practitioner of Interuniversalism who was interviewed, Taheri has been "threatened and tortured by the authorities" (IHRDC 25 Oct. 2013). Taheri was last arrested in May 2011 (MEHR 27 Oct. 2013; Doostdar Apr. 2012, 131). The lawyer stated that he was "convicted of charges including blasphemy, claims of religious revelations and presenting himself as an expert on medicine without having any background in the field" (IHRDC 25 Oct. 2013). According to two sources, he is serving a five-year sentence (IHRDC 25 Oct. 2013; Inside of Iran 16 Feb. 2012). The President of MEHR, however, indicated that the sentence was for seven years of imprisonment (27 Oct. 2013). Some sources note that Taheri was also sentenced to 74 lashes (Inside of Iran 16 Feb. 2012; MEHR 27 Oct. 2013; HRANA 20 May 2013) and a fine (MEHR 27 Oct. 2013; HRANA 20 May 2013).

The Director of Interuniversalism UK also stated that "[a]part from Master Taheri himself, his family in Iran has also been mistreated by the Iranian authorities to increase the pressures on Master Taheri" (Interuniversalism UK 30 Oct. 2013). Sources report that as of August 2013, Taheri was in poor health condition due to an ongoing hunger strike (IOPHRI 19 Aug. 2013; HRANA 8 Aug. 2013).

According to the practitioner of Interuniversalism interviewed by the IHRDC lawyer, the followers of Interuniversalism have reportedly been subject to "government repression," including raids and arrests in their Tehran offices (IHRDC 25 Oct. 2013). The Senior Researcher at the Human Rights in Iran Unit also stated that followers of Taheri have been "detained, interrogated, harassed, and threatened" and "[s]ome of their gatherings have been disrupted" (28 Oct. 2013). According to the Director of Interuniversalism UK, "many trainers and followers have been detained by Iranian security forces" (30 Oct. 2013). The lawyer also stated that the interviewee had heard that some of those arrested were forced to "implicat[e] Taheri under torture," but emphasized that this was "hearsay" (IHRDC 25 Oct. 2013). The interviewee also reportedly stated that "all members of the group who were once arrested have since been freed on bail, but they are still periodically summoned by the authorities for questioning" (ibid.). Iran Briefing Foundation, a non-profit human rights organization registered in the US that reports on "Iran's military apparatus dominance" and human rights violations by Iran's military (Iran Briefing Foundation n.d.), states that a journalist and three doctors affiliated with Interuniversalism were arrested in June 2011 (ibid. 23 June 2011; ibid. 15 June 2011).

The Director of Interuniversalism UK stated that both his organization and Interuniversalism Inc. in the US have "been accused of misleading the Iranian people by the pro-governmental news agencies in Iran" (Interuniversalism UK 30 Oct. 2013). He also stated that the Director of Interuniversalism Inc. "has been threaten[ed] by the Iranian news agencies and directly [by] Iranian intelligence forces" (ibid.). He added that the Director of Interuniversalism Inc. "has been interrogated by Iranian intelligence agencies several times," but that she managed to leave Iran before Interuniversalism activists were barred from leaving the country (ibid.). The Senior Researcher also stated that "the head [of] the LA-based Interuniversalism center, around 2009, was detained in solitary confinement and intensely interrogated for several weeks" (28 Oct. 2013). The Director of Interuniversalism UK also indicated that his family has been threatened due to his activities and that the organization's website "has been attacked twice" (30 Oct. 2013). Corroboration could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

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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Senior Researcher, Human Rights in Iran Unit, Brooklyn College, City University of New York. 28 October 2013. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral Sources: The following individuals were unable to provide information for this Response: assistant professor, Islamic Studies and Anthropology of Religion, University of Chicago Divinity School; associate professor, Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto; Executive Director, International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran; lecturer, Department of Historical Studies; professor of Political Science, York University; senior correspondent, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The following individuals did not provide information within the timeframes of this response: Executive Director, Radio Zamaneh Foundation; representative, Iran Desk, Amnesty International. Attempts to contact the following individuals were unsuccessful within time constraints of this response: International Organisation to Preserve Human Rights in Iran; representatives of Interuniversalism in Canada and US.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; eci.net; *Ettela'at*; Factiva; Faradarmani-France.com; Fars News Agency; France24; Freedom House; Human Rights Watch; Iranian Hotline; Mataheri.com; Mehriran.de; *Tehran Times*; Toronto Initiative for Iranian Studies; PressTV; United Nations – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran; United States – Department of State.

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