

# IRAN: Wave of support in the EU for persecuted Baha'is

[Foreign Minister of Luxembourg writes to Iranian counterpart in wave of support for Iran's persecuted Baha'is](#)

Baha'is International Community (30.07.2020) – <http://www.bic.org/brussels> – The Foreign Minister of Luxembourg, Jean Asselborn, [has written](#) to Iran's Foreign Minister, Muhammad Javad Zarif, condemning the recent escalation of the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the country. The letter is part of a new wave of support for Iran's Baha'is by Members of the European Parliament (EP) as well as numerous parliamentarians and prominent figures in Germany, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Finland and Ireland.

In the letter sent to Mr. Zarif, Mr. Jean Asselborn has expressed his concern regarding the situation of the Baha'is in Iran. He has followed this with a public [statement](#) asserting that the reopening of proceedings against "members of the Baha'i community in recent weeks" and the "incarceration of members of the community" during the COVID-19 pandemic were "particularly worrying".

Since the beginning of 2020 and despite the ongoing health crisis, the Iranian authorities have increased their religiously-motivated prosecution of the Baha'is, targeting over 100 individuals in Bushehr, Fars, Isfahan, Kerman, South Khorasan, Tehran, and Yazd provinces. Moreover, despite international calls to release prisoners of conscience due to the global pandemic, some Baha'is still remain in prison.

At the European Union level, the Chair of the European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with Iran, Cornelia Ernst, has issued a [statement](#) of support, stating that the "intimidation and repression levelled against religious minorities, in particular the Baha'i community, must...end."

The European Parliament's Vice President, Heidi Hautala, together with other EP members, has signed a [joint statement](#) calling on the Iranian authorities to "cease the baseless accusations against Baha'is, to acquit them of all charges and to let them freely practice their faith."

On the national level, a group of over 30 German parliamentarians, human rights defenders, health experts and non-governmental organizations have appealed to the Iranian government in a [letter](#) addressed to President Hassan Rouhani to drop the charges against Iran's Baha'is in the proceedings and to release all remaining prisoners.

The Dutch government has also put the situation of the Baha'i community in Iran on the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Committee for September.

In Ireland, more than 70 politicians and health experts have signed a similar [statement](#), writing that "[a]s we in Ireland begin to be released from lockdown, the Iranian authorities are locking up dozens of Baha'is." The letter has further asked the Iranian government to "end the state-sponsored dehumanisation and persecution of their Baha'i citizens" and to "allow Baha'is their basic human rights".

Parliamentarians in the [UK](#) and [Norway](#) have also called for an end to the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran.

"These strong expressions of support by European officials at the highest levels demonstrate that although the Iranian government has tried, time and time again and city after city, to destroy the Baha'i community as a viable entity," said Rachel Bayani, Representative of the Baha'i International Community to the European Union in Brussels. "These discriminatory policies and actions do not go unnoticed and are condemned the world over".

Outside of Europe, just last month, [a group of 21 senior members of parliament and senators in Canada has made an "urgent demand"](#) to the Iranian government to halt the recent escalation of the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran. In the United States, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom has [expressed concern](#) about the persecution of the Baha'is and various members of congress called for the release of the Baha'is from prison. A [joint letter](#) signed by 19 civil society organizations and addressed to the US Secretary of State has expressed concern regarding the rise in persecution against the Baha'is. This week, too, more than 250 Australian health practitioners have [signed an open letter](#) expressing their concern about the human rights pressures faced by the Baha'i community in Iran.

The Baha'is in Iran have been systematically persecuted since

the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. They are barred from numerous businesses and professions and employment in the public sector.

They are denied the right to study in universities, are routinely arrested, interrogated, and imprisoned, their properties are confiscated, their cemeteries desecrated, and their private livelihoods are often disrupted or blocked—all because of their beliefs. This persecution has been widely documented and condemned by [UN bodies and the international community](#) for four decades.

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## **IRAN: Seven Christians face prison, exile, work restrictions and fines**

– Article 18 (29.06.2020)  
– <https://articleeighteen.com/news/6263/> – Seven Christian converts in the south-western Iranian city of Bushehr have been given sentences ranging from prison and exile to work restrictions and fines.

The seven, including three married couples, received their verdicts on 21 June at the revolutionary court in Bushehr.

They were given 20 days to appeal, and intend to do so.

The four men – Habib Heydari, Pooriya Peyma, and brothers Sam and Sasan Khosravi – each received custodial sentences. Sam and Sasan also face work restrictions and exile after their release.

The three women – Fatemeh Talebi, and sisters Maryam and Marjan Falahi – were fined. Maryam, a nurse, was also given a lifetime ban on working for any national institution, including the hospital she's worked at for 20 years.

### **Details of sentences**

Sam and Sasan were each sentenced to one year in prison, followed by a two-year exile from Bushehr, which includes a ban on working in their specialist profession – the

hospitality sector.

Habib also received a one-year prison sentence, but no exile or work restrictions. Pooriya received a 91-day sentence – the minimum jail time required to ensure the prisoner leaves with a criminal record – and again no exile or work restriction.

Sam and Sasan's wives, Maryam and Marjan, received fines of 8 million tomans (around \$400) and 6 million tomans (around \$300) respectively.

Maryam's additional lifetime ban on employment at any national institution is a severe blow after her two decades of service at the local hospital.

Finally, Pooriya's wife, Fatemeh, received a 4 million toman fine (around \$200) – equivalent to two months' salary for the average Iranian.

The seven Christians were given their verdicts to read, but not allowed to take them home or to make copies.

They were each convicted of the same charge – “propaganda against the state” – under Article 500 of the Islamic Penal Code, which provides for up to a year in prison for anyone found guilty of engaging in “any type of propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran or in support of opposition groups and associations”.

The Iranian Parliament recently [passed](#) amendments to two articles of the Penal Code, including Article 500, but they do not appear to have had any impact in this particular verdict.

The amendments enable judges to label those convicted of “insulting Islam” or “propaganda against Islam” as being members of “sects”. Those convicted of membership of such groups can face flogging or even the death penalty, in addition to imprisonment and fines.

## **Background**

The seven Christians were first [arrested](#) on 1 July 2019, alongside Sam and Sasan's mother, Khatoon Fatolahzadeh, who is in her sixties and as a result was released later the same day.

The seven detained Christians were [released](#) over two weeks later, having each posted bail of 300 million tomans (around \$30,000).

During the arrests, officers introducing themselves as agents from the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) stormed the Christians' homes in a coordinated operation, confiscating

Bibles, Christian literature, wooden crosses and pictures carrying Christian symbols, along with laptops, phones, all forms of identity cards, bank cards and other personal belongings.

The agents also searched their work offices and confiscated computer hard drives and security-camera recordings.

They treated them harshly, even though small children were present during the arrests.

The seven Christians were then held in solitary confinement in the MOIS office in Bushehr and denied access to lawyers. They were also coerced to confess to their “crimes” on camera.

Some of their associates were later summoned for interrogation.

The seven initially faced two additional charges – “collusion”, and “membership of a group hostile to the regime” – which could have led to ten-year sentences.

They were acquitted of those charges at a hearing on 30 December 2019, but told that the remaining charge against them was “applicable” because of their possession of Christian literature and other Christian items, which were claimed to be evidence they had evangelised.

The judge even named some of the Christian literature that had been found at their properties, including copies of ‘Who is Jesus?’ and ‘Getting to Know the Bible’.

A further hearing took place on 20 April, after which the court clerk told them they could expect a verdict within a week, though their lawyer told them it could take months.

Article18’s advocacy director, Mansour Borji, commented: “Condemning these people to prison because of their possession of Bibles and Christian symbols is a clear demonstration that Iran’s Foreign Minister and others aren’t telling the truth when they say that ‘no-one is put in prison in Iran simply because of their beliefs’.

“These people have done nothing that could be construed as ‘propaganda against the state’ or ‘acting against national security’, but nevertheless they have been treated so unjustly. The international community must hold Iran to account for this miscarriage of justice, and many others like it.”

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# IRAN: Four Christian converts started serving five-year prison sentences

– Middle East Concern (05.06.2020) –  
<https://meconcern.org/2020/06/05/iran-four-christian-converts-serve-five-year-prison-sentences/> Hossein Kadivar, Khalil Dehghanpour, Kamal Naamanian and Mohammed Vafadar obeyed a summons issued on 28 May. They had been released on bail of about \$13,000 each last July. They presented themselves at Evan Prison on 2 June to begin serving their five-year sentence.

They were among nine Christian converts belonging to the “Church of Iran” denomination who were arrested over a four-week period at the beginning of 2019, accused of endangering state security and promoting Zionism. Following a disagreement with the judge over the choice of a defence lawyer, the other five men were immediately transferred to Evin prison, as they were unable to meet extortionate bail demands of about \$130,000 each.

In October 2019 all nine were convicted of “acting against national security” and each sentenced to five years’ imprisonment. The sentences were upheld on appeal in February 2020.

Of the four men who presented themselves at Evin Prison earlier this week, three are married with families, while Mohammad is single.

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## **Over 140 Sufis/ Dervishes still in prison in Iran. The European Parliament should urge Tehran to release them**

– HRWF (04.06.2020) – *Human Rights Without Frontiers* urges

- the Members of the European Parliament,
- the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief,
- the Sub-committee on Human Rights,
- · and other institutions of the European Union

to ask Tehran to release over 140 Sufis/ Dervishes who have been in prison since February 2018 for peacefully demonstrating against the authorities' intensified persecution of their community.

In March, Iran, which has been heavily hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, announced that it would “pardon” and release thousands of detainees. Unfortunately, very few non-violent prisoners of conscience have benefited from this “generosity”. This is especially the case for the Sufis/ Dervishes who were detained after mass arrests in February 2018. Every day, they are under threat of being infected by COVID-19.

## ***The facts: Mass arrest of several hundred Sufis in February 2018***

On the night of 19 February 2018, several hundred Dervishes, both men and women, gathered outside the residence of their spiritual leader, Noor Ali Tabandeh, in an area of Tehran known as Golestan Haftom. The group met to protest against the authorities' intensified persecution of their community and to prevent the possible arrest of their leader.

The Iranian police and forces of the Revolutionary Guard's Basij faction disbanded the peaceful gathering, opened fire on them and arrested hundreds of protestors.

Afterwards, Tabandeh was placed under house arrest without any official charges or trial. In protest, Tabandeh began a hunger strike in November 2019 and was subsequently hospitalised. He was denied access to his doctors and advisors and, after severe instances of medical malpractice, he died in December. The spiritual leader had appointed Alireza Jazbi as his successor, but his own nephew, Mohammed Tabandeh, who is linked to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and has the assistance of an anti-Sufi cleric with close connections to senior Iranian government officials, contested Jazbi for leadership.[1]

While the exact number of arrested demonstrators cannot be confirmed, according to reports from the community, 382 Sufis were arrested, out of which 11 were women. Many of the detained were brutalised by the authorities and denied medical

care, some were killed, and over 200 were sentenced to prison terms. One of the protestors, Mohammed Salas, was reportedly hanged for allegedly killing one of the policemen, which he had confessed to under torture.[2] Of those sentenced to jail, four are former administrators and collaborators of the Majzooban-e-noor Dervish news site.[3] The Sufi-operated website posts articles pertaining to the Gonabadi Order.[4]

The court ordered prison sentences ranging from two to 26 years. Additionally, some were sentenced to between 74 to 144 lashes, exile to a designated province in Iran, a ban on civic activities and/or travel, or a combination of these supplemental punishments. The victims argue that they were denied a fair trial.[5]

### ***Sufis behind bars: some statistics***

As of 1 April 2020, Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) documented 146 cases of detained Sufis in its Prisoners' Database. Many more were sentenced to heavy prison terms due to the incidents in February 2018, but a number of them have also either been released or sent to internal exile since.

Most of the Sufi prisoners detailed in HRWF's database were sentenced to between five to seven years in prison, in some cases to more than 10 years and, in one case, to 23 years. The majority of them were also sentenced to more than 70 lashes.

They were charged with:

- Propaganda against the system – § 500
- Disruption of public order – § 618
- Assembly and collusion against national security – § 610
- . Disobeying police orders – § 607

### ***Advocacy initiatives at the European Parliament***

On 7 March 2018, 24 Members of the European Parliament from different political groups, (EPP, S&D, ALDE and ECR) published a public appeal condemning the massive repression of the Gonabadi Dervishes and their 90-year-old spiritual leader Mr Noorali Tabandeh in Iran:[6]

The Members of the European Parliament, appeal to Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to immediately address this issue with the Iranian authorities and call for full respect of human rights and prisoners' rights, for the right of freedom of religion and belief, the right for freedom of assembly, the right for freedom of thought as set out in international conventions.

The MEPs further call on Hassan Rohani, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Sardar Rahimi, Chief of police in Tehran to immediately halt this systematic violence, imprisonments and intimidation against all Sufis in Iran, and more specifically the Gonabadi Sufi Order followers and sympathisers and demand the immediate release of detainees who have been imprisoned because of their beliefs.

In June 2018, when Mohammad Salas was executed for participating in the February demonstration, the office of MEP Gérard Deprez, Chair of the Friends of a Free Iran group in the European Parliament, issued a strong statement.[7] He called on the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and the European Parliament's President Antonio Tajani "to immediately condemn this brutal act of barbarity that has been carried out by the Iranian regime".

### ***Advocacy initiatives by the U.S.***

In its 2020 annual report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) stressed that most of the Sufis arrested in February 2018 and sentenced to heavy prison terms are still in detention. USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Government:

- redesignate Iran as a "country of particular concern", for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- impose targeted sanctions on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- press for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience;
- and reauthorize and ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States.[9]

### **Sources**

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# **Battling COVID, Iran regime**

# makes Jews its bogeyman

*– Iran has used the pandemic to spin some particularly vicious antisemitic propaganda, write the Anti-Defamation League’s Shaya Lerner and David Andrew Weinberg*

Iranwire (03.04.2020) – <https://iranwire.com/en/blogs/26/6884>  
– To date, Iran has had the [highest number of reported deaths](#) from the COVID-19 global pandemic out of any country in Asia other than China. While battling this virus, the regime has once again become the number one state sponsor of scapegoating Jewish people, baselessly blaming world Jewry for the disease’s spread.

Indeed, this crisis has led the regime to engage in fantastical, outrageous conspiracy theories about the current pandemic that are deeply infused with antisemitism, including [classic tropes](#). These include claiming the disease is an attack on Iran by using genies and magic, that COVID-19 is part of an external biological attack on Iran by the United States with Jewish and Israeli assistance, and that the virus is part of a Zionist plot to gain global power.

## ***Accusing Jews of Sorcery***

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei delivered a major [annual](#) speech on March 22 in which he [emphasized](#): “Americans are being accused of creating this virus” and even claimed “there are enemies who are genies, and there are enemies who are humans, and they help one another. The intelligence services of many countries cooperate with one another against us.”

The Supreme Leader did not explicitly identify Jews or Israel in this regard, but his own office soon clarified the point. Khamenei's official website [elaborated](#) on his speech, posting remarks from a cleric who [explained](#): "There is no doubt that the Jews and especially the Zionists previously have a long history of supernatural affairs and matters such as a relationship with the devil and genies" and "Israel's spy agencies also undoubtedly take advantage of these matters."

The [official](#) Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting then [promoted](#) this cleric's explanation of Khamenei's speech as well.

The cyberwarfare division of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) posted Khamenei's speech followed by an undated television clip from Iran's [state-run, youth-oriented](#) Channel Three. The clip featured another cleric [asserting](#) that "the Jews are experts in sorcery and in creating relationships with demons," and that "Israel wanted to use demonic force to infiltrate the intelligence systems of Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas."

### ***Accusing Jews of Biological Warfare***

The regime's propaganda has also spread the baseless allegation that COVID-19 is the result of a biological attack by outside forces to weaken Iran carried out by the US, Israel, or Zionists and Jews.

For example, Iranian MP Gholamali Jafarzadeh [tweeted](#) that the disease's progression "is not normal, and I believe it is a kind of biological attack by the US and the Zionist regime."

Similarly, London-based Iran analyst Kasra Aarabi has [documented](#) that Iranian state television recently hosted a professor from the IRGC's medical academy describing COVID-19 as a "biological ethnic weapon" created by "Americans and

[the] Zionist regime.”

Other communication sources [linked](#) to the IRGC have declared that COVID-19 is a “Zionist biological terrorist attack” and that Israel may have already conducted “twelve bioterrorist attacks against the people of Iran.” Iran’s [state-run](#) English-language PressTV explained the Iranian death toll by [claiming](#) that “Zionist elements developed [a] deadlier strain of coronavirus against Iran.”

However, most of these conspiracy theories imagine the United States leading such a biological attack, either with the help of [Jewish capitalists](#) or [Israel](#), or [to benefit Israel](#) or at the [behest](#) of [Jewish](#) puppet [masters](#).

Another bizarre conspiracy theory in this regard centers on an [old medical study](#) at Stanford University that sequenced genomes from individuals of Iranian descent to help calibrate [blood thinner dosages](#).

A medical expert on Iran’s [state-run](#) Ofogh TV recently cited this study to try to prove that COVID-19 is an ethnic bioweapon targeting Iranians, [asserting](#) that “25,000 of our genes are held by the Americans and Israelis” as a result of “\$200,000 donated to the university by a Baha’i foundation.” Iran’s semi-official Tasnim News Agency even [suggested](#) that this American research project at Stanford was likely conducted by Baha’is of secret Jewish origin.

### ***Accusing Jews of World Domination***

Another central theme of Iranian regime propaganda regarding the global health crisis has been the [antisemitic conspiracy theory](#) that Jews are all-powerful or seek world domination.

For example, Tasnim News Agency has been running a series of articles alleging that the virus is part of an

American and Jewish plot to gain world domination through population control, including an article [claiming](#) this strategy was hatched by “the unique Jewish scholar and American strategist Henry Alfred Kissinger,” who the piece describes as being a master controller of government and international finance to this day.

Another Tasnim article about COVID-19 [suggested](#) that the Western world is founded on the immoral principles found in Niccolo Machiavelli’s book *The Prince*. The article went on to inaccurately argue that the Medici rulers for whom Machiavelli wrote the book were Jewish and even responsible for the modern institution of usurious lending.

Similarly, Iran’s English-language PressTV has recently [warned](#): “Don’t be surprised if the recent coronavirus phenomenon has a New World Order fingerprint,” similar to what it called “the Zionist/Neocon false flag events of 9/11/2001” to help a “self-serving psychopathic elite to achieve a one-world government.”

### ***Exporting Antisemitism***

Just as Iran’s fanatical regime is founded on the principle of exporting its revolution abroad, its conspiratorial and antisemitic propaganda about COVID-19 is also encouraged for export.

Iran is now broadcasting the fallacy that COVID-19 is a Jewish and American plot into numerous Western languages, such as [in French](#) and [English](#) on PressTV, as well as [in Spanish](#) on Iran’s HispanTV.

Iranian-backed insurgents in Yemen are now propagating the theory that COVID-19 is a Jewish conspiracy [to profit](#) from Muslim deaths and [to stop](#) Muslims from going on pilgrimage, antisemitic slanders that semi-official Iranian

news outlets are all too happy to [rebroadcast](#) as [news](#).

The Iranian people have unfortunately been hit hard by COVID-19, and we can expect the regime to continue blaming Jews, Israel, and America as the current public health crisis transpires. With COVID-19 continuing its deadly spread across the globe, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) will keep exposing this kind of hateful and antisemitic scapegoating wherever it occurs.

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## **IRAN: Digital church unites Christians**

**– Mohabat News (15.04.2020) – A digital church in Iran provides fellowship, teaching, training, and counseling for Christians isolated from each other during Iran's ongoing health crisis.**

Yesterday, churches around the world met digitally to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. A worldwide coronavirus outbreak has closed many church buildings, forcing Christians to move their services online.

But Heart4Iran launched a virtual church back in October 2019, [Heart4Iran's Mike Ansari](#) says. "The conditions in Iran do not afford us the healthy and thriving church model that

that we are used to in the West. [Most] of the Iranian believers are coming from [an] Islamic background. These are converts. They are isolated believers.” Heart4Iran calls their digital fellowship Mohabat Virtual Church.

The goal? To train the next wave of Iranian Christian leaders to secure the future of Christianity across Iran – through partnership and collaboration with like-minded individuals and organizations.

### ***How it works***

Mohabat’s virtual church connects Iranian believers around the country into one family, Ansari says. “So, the very first virtual church that we launched for Iran in the region, we had roughly 1,000 people participate. And one individual . . . from Afghanistan gave his heart to Christ. This is telling us that there’s a huge demand, especially with a younger audience.”

The Mohabat Virtual Church airs every Thursday on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and [www.mykelisa.com](http://www.mykelisa.com). In the next few months, Ansari says, they plan on starting a Sunday school program called Superbook produced by the Christian Broadcasting Network. “It’s a children’s program that has been dubbed and finalized into Farsi and very soon we’ll be able to reach the children of Iran, the parents, and Sunday schools across Iran and the region with a knowledge of God’s love for our children and our families.”

But the online church doesn’t just stream sermons. During the Coronavirus outbreak, they minister to Iran – the epicenter of coronavirus in the Middle East – with a message of hope. This platform is fully staffed by Iranian pastoral, technical and follow-up team members. “These are individuals that all come from a Muslim background, understanding their own people. And they’re available through our call center. Every single

individual, every single phone call, every single chat is important to us. Is important to the kingdom. And we try to engage them and pray with them. And let them know that they are not alone in their journey.”

### ***God is working in Iran***

Ansari says God’s work is just beginning in Iran. Political turmoil presents enough challenges without the coronavirus outbreak, which has hit Iran especially hard.

In the recent years, Iran has seen a huge growth of indigenous Christian growth in its population.

“You have to understand,” Ansari says, “that the first millennia of Christianity, before there was Islam in Iran, there was Christianity in Iran. And it was eradicated by the Muslims. This organic reemergence of Christianity in Iran is an amazing phenomenon. It’s a miracle. It’s God’s design to bring reconciliation with the people that had Cyrus in Old Testament, that had Xerxes in the Old Testament.”

Iran faces a tumultuous time, but the Holy Spirit works in the country. Pray that the Church in Iran will triumph.

Read more: [‘Jesus is Building His Church’ Inside Iran, Millions Watching Christian Satellite TV](#)