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At least 10 Christians arrested in Shiraz

HRANA (01.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ZMtiDz> - Local sources have reported that at least ten Christian converts were arrested during a ceremony in a house church in Shiraz.

According to report of Human Rights Activists News Agency in Iran (HRANA), a group of Christian converts had gathered to celebrate "Christmas" and also the eve of New Year, then with the sudden influx by plainclothes forces, they were arrested and transferred to an unknown location, on Friday 25th December.

According to the report, Mohsen Javadi, Elaheh eizadi, Mohammad Golshani Kia, Reza Mohammadi, Mahmoud Salehi, Mousa Saripoor, Ali Reza Alighanbari, Mohammad Reza Soltanian, "Brother Khalil" and another person (identity unknown), were arrested.

The security guards were armed with pistols and had radio. Their behavior and type of arresting these citizens was described as "offensive". Personal belongings of the detainees as well as satellite receiver equipment were damaged and confiscated.

There is no exact information regarding the location and condition of detainees yet.

Iranian Christian prisoner temporarily released from prison

Maysam Hojati, a Christian convert residing in Esfahan, was temporarily released from prison after 15 days, during which he endured solitary confinement and lengthy interrogation sessions. He had been arrested a couple of days before Christmas in his parental home.

Mohabat News (07.01.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ZmcoWO> - Maysam Hojati, a young Christian man, was temporarily released from prison on January 6, 2016 after posting a bail.

Mr. Hojati who is 34 years old, was also known as Soroush among his friends. Mr. Hojati had been arrested just two days before Christmas, on December 23, 2015, when four plain-cloths security authorities raided his parental home in Esfahan.

Authorities who identified themselves as intelligence officers forced their way in the house and beat Mr. Hojati in the presence of his parents.

Report: Iranian Christian Convert Arrested During Christmas Season

Plain-clothed authorities searched the house thoroughly and confiscated Mr. Hojati's personal belongings including a few Bibles, hymn books, Christian articles, personal computer and cellphone. At the end they took down Hojati's Christmas tree.

Accusation and Lengthy Interrogations

After Mr. Hojati's arrest, his parents did everything in their power to find out about his whereabouts and health with no success.

Authorities blind folded Mr. Hojati and transferred him to an unknown location immediately. He was put in solitary confinement in a five square meter cell with no windows for 12 days. During that time he was interrogated for 10 to 12 hours a day.

Interrogators threatened him and beat him every time he refused to give them the answers they wanted.

The questions they asked him were mostly related to his relationship with foreign churches and their leaders, how they conducted house-church services, and distributed Bibles. Finally, they asked Mr. Hojati to sign a disclaimer.

A source close to the situation told Mohabat News that two days before his release, Mr. Hojati was taken to the intelligence ward of Esfahan prison known as A-T.

Someone called Mr. Hojati's parents at 9am on Wednesday January 6, and asked them to go to the Revolutionary Court of Esfahan to find out about the fate of their son.

In the court Mr. Hojati was officially charged and a ruling was issued for him to post a bail for his temporary release. Mr. Hojati posted a one billion Rial (approximately 35 thousand USD) bail before for his release.

Hojati was charged with being baptized as a Muslim-born (apostasy), evangelism, distributing Bibles, and partaking in house-church planting.

With this heavy bail posted, Hojati should wait to be summoned to court for his hearing.

Iranian Christians Pay a Heavy Price for their Faith

Today many Iranian Christians are serving time in prison for their faith. Iranian Christians, especially Farsi-speaking Christians, have been facing the threat of imprisonment for years for sharing and practicing their faith. Islamic regime of Iran considers gathering of Christians in their home for worship, a threat to Iran's national security.

Almost all Farsi-speaking churches are closed in Tehran and other cities. Islamic authorities in Iran strive to defame evangelical Christians by falsely accusing them and to tell Iranians that evangelical Christianity is a corrupt form of Christianity, thus not approved by the government. Therefore, Iran's judicial and intelligence system deem Christian converts a threat to national security, accusing Christians, especially Farsi-speaking Christians, of arbitrary security and political charges in order to crack down on them.

Iranian pastor released after 5 years in jail

Farshid Fathi secures early release, 6 months after being handed extra year in jail

World Watch Monitor (22.12.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1NKdDto> - An Iranian pastor has been released early from prison, just six months after he failed to appeal a sentence to an extra year in jail and 74 lashes for allegedly possessing two litres of alcohol in his prison cell.

Farshid Fathi was serving a six-year prison sentence – extended to seven years – for "action against the regime's security, being in contact with foreign organisations, and religious propaganda". Due to be released in Dec. 2017, he was then told by prison officials in early July that he would be released this year – at that time they said on 10 Dec.

He was originally arrested on 26 Dec. 2010 at the same time as around 60 other Christians, many belonging to house churches in Tehran and other cities. Most of those have now been released.

The governor of Tehran, Morteza Tamadon, on 4 January, 2011 described the detained Christians as "extremists" who "penetrate the body of Islam like corrupt and deviant people". He added that they were trying to establish "an extreme form of Christianity like the Taliban and Wahhabis in Islam".

Fathi, who is a 35-year-old father of two, was imprisoned without trial in Evin prison. After 15 months of uncertainty, he was tried in January 2012. Details of his court trial have not been published.

Iran's Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei had made a speech in October 2010 saying that house churches should be "dealt with". A new wave of surveillance and arrests against Christians followed soon after, with leaders of house church groups, such as Farshid Fathi, especially singled out for longer detentions. Born into a Muslim family, Fathi became a Christian at the age of 17 and at the time of his arrest he was working full-time as a pastor and leader of house churches.

Fathi served his sentence alongside another man, Alireza Seyyadian, who was also imprisoned for six years. Seyyadian was arrested as he was trying to leave the country for a holiday at the time of Persian New Year in March 2012, and was also transferred with Fathi to Rajaei-Shahr prison.

Seyyadian is a member of a group known as Church of Iran, which holds a non-Trinitarian theology. He was sentenced to 90 lashes and six years' imprisonment for "acting against national security through collusion, gathering and propagating against the Islamic regime". However, he was released after three and a half years, in August 2015.

Background

Estimates from evidence provided by the American Center for Law and Justice, Article 18 and Middle East Concern suggest that, in May 2015, there were 90 people detained in Iranian prisons on account of their Christian faith and practice.

According to the 2015 World Watch List by Open Doors International, a charity that supports Christians who face hostilities because of their faith, Iran ranks seventh in the top 10 countries where Christians are persecuted.

The main driver of persecution in Iran, it says, is "Islamic extremism"; Christians from an Islamic background are especially targeted. Increasing numbers of Farsi-speaking churches have been forced to close, some of which have been there for centuries. This is a development that has not been seen in the history of the Church in Iran, stated the World Watch List.

"Expectations were high when President Rouhani took office in 2013. However, his powers are limited and, in the short run, no concrete changes are expected for religious minorities," said Open Doors.

Mohabat News reports that even Sunni Muslims "cannot enjoy the least amount of freedom". As with Christians and other religious minorities, Sunnis are not allowed to build a mosque of their own in Tehran, the capital.

Few Christian converts arrested in Karaj temporarily released

There seems to be a slight change in Iran's strategy for controlling the growth of house churches in the country. It seems the Islamic regime of Iran is seeking to create a situation where Iranian Christian leaders are forced to leave the country.

Mohabat News (05.12.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1IPrZ9Z> – Christian sources in Karaj reported that a number of Christian converts who had been recently arrested were temporarily released.

These Christians had been arrested when the Revolutionary Guard forces raided their house church on August 7, 2015.

Two of those arrested were identified as Esmaeil Falahati and Mehdi Haj Mola-Hossein. These Christian men were arrested along with a group of other believers.

These two men were temporarily released on bail on September 9, after spending 33 days in detention, during which they were put in solitary confinement and subject to mental torture of various kinds.

Also, a Christian woman (Haydeh) arrested in the same attack was able to post bail a few days later and be temporarily released.

Prior reports indicated that three others of those arrested during the same incident were released shortly after their arrest by signing a disclaimer.

The Christians were threatened to not spread the news about their arrest. However, a few of them told their story to Mohabat News after leaving the country.

One of those who spoke to Mohabat News was Esmaeil Falahati, 35 years old. He said, "It was August 7, 2015 and we had gathered in a garden near Kan with a few brothers and sisters when security authorities entered the garden and arrested us."

He continued, "The authorities threatened the owner of the garden and put him on the ground with a gun to his throat in front of his child. What was surprising to us was that they had a number of arrest warrants pre-signed and stamped and they wrote our names on them on the spot! They searched the whole garden, despite being very dark. It seemed they were looking for something specific."

Regarding what happened after their arrest, Mr. Falahati said, "They took me to my house around 10 PM to search there as well. I had some Bibles and Christian books at home. The authorities took away all the books as well as my computer and some other personal belongings".

Accusations

These Christian converts were charged with propagating against the Islamic regime of Iran as well as gathering with intent to disrupt national security. The Revolutionary Court reviewed the case for these Christians and ruled that they could be temporarily released until their case is completely processed, providing they posted bail.

The court asked for bail of 700 million Rials (approximately 25,000 USD) for Mr. Falahati's temporary release. His family had to post a title deed worth almost twice as much as the requested amount.

Regarding his time in jail, Mr. Falahati told Mohabat News, "The Revolutionary Guard interrogators told me that it would be better for me to leave the country when I'm released temporarily, otherwise they would harm me and my family".

The Iranian security authorities have not provided any explanation regarding the reason for the arrest of these Christians, although documents and other evidences suggest that they were only arrested for their Christian faith and gathering in their homes for worship.

Iranian Christians have no other way but to gather in their homes as official churches have been closed down and pastors and Christians leaders are forced to leave the country.

It seems that the Iranian Islamic regime's current strategy for limiting the growth of Christianity in the country is to create a challenging environment for Christians so they leave the country against their will.

Fourteen Christians arrested near Tehran

CSW (09.11.2015) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that 13 Christians were arrested in the city of Varamin, south east of Tehran.

Zari Shah Khasti (Poorkaveh), Simmin, Bahram, Amin, Leyla, Zahra, Mehdi and Farzaneh, Shayan, Sara, Nazanin, Elnaz and Mohammad Shah Khasti were arrested by agents of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence following a raid on a house church. Most of the group were previously members of the Emmanuel Protestant Church in Tehran, which was forced to close by Iranian authorities in 2012 and to end its Farsi (Persian) language services.

Another member of the church who was not at the gathering was arrested at his home in Tehran during the early hours of 2 November. Since their arrests the group's whereabouts are unknown and family members are concerned about their safety.

There has been no improvement in human rights under Rouhani's presidency, despite his reputation as a moderate. Instead Iran has witnessed a deterioration in the human rights climate since his election to office. Political opponents, journalists, activists and members of religious minorities continue to be imprisoned, with converts to Christianity and members of the Baha'i faith being targeted particularly.

There has also been a spike in executions since the advent of the Rouhani government, with Iran executing more people per capita than any other country. Since 2014, more than 1,000 people have been executed; including women, political activists and religious minorities, marking a 12-year high in the number of executions.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are extremely concerned at the arrests of these 14 Christians and the fact that their whereabouts remain unknown, which gives rise to concerns regarding their wellbeing. These people had merely gathered peacefully and had not partaken in any illegal activities. It is unacceptable that the Iranian authorities continue to harass the Christian community without cause. We urge the Iranian government to ensure that these people are released without delay and we reiterate our call for Iran to uphold its human rights obligations as a signatory to several international covenants, including Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees the right to freedom of religion or belief."

Tahereh Reza'i arrested and sent to Yazd prison

Iran Press Watch (19.10.2015) - <http://iranpresswatch.org/post/13193/> - According to Bahá'í News, Tahereh Reza'i, a Baha'í resident of Isfahan, was arrested in front of her home on 19 October and transferred later that day to Yazd prison to serve her sentence.

According to reliable sources, Isfahan provincial authorities arrested Tahereh Reza'i on behalf of Yazd province.

Mrs. Reza'i and 19 other Bahá'í citizens of Isfahan and Yazd had been arrested simultaneously at an earlier date and had received deferred sentences of one to four years each. The sentences were handed down by Section 1 of the Revolutionary Court of Yazd and upheld by the provincial Appeals Court on 16 April 2014.

Their names and sentences are as follows:

Saba Golshan (Isfahan) – four years of prison, one year deferred

Shahram Eshraqi, Khosrow Dehqani (Isfahan), Shahram Fallah (Kerman), Navid Haqiqi (Yasoudj), Iman Rashidi (Yazd) – three years of prison, 1 year deferred

Fariborz Baqi, Nateqeh Naeemi, Shabnam Mottahed, Fariba Ashtari (Yazd), Naqme Farabi (Isfahan) – two years of prison, 1 year deferred

Farah Baqi, Mehran Eslami, Aazam Mottahari, Farahnaz Misaqian (Yazd), Sohrab Naqipour, Azar Toloe-Pourkhorsand, Sassan Haqiri, Tahereh Rohani and Vida Haqiqi (Isfahan) – 1 year of prison, 1 year deferred

Iranian death sentence commuted to two years' theology study

Soheil Arabi ordered to read 13 religious books and serve 90 days in prison after court annuls original sentence

The Guardian (30.09.20156) - <http://bit.ly/1M1JHrj> - An Iranian man who was on death row for allegedly insulting the prophet Muhammad has had his sentence commuted to reading 13 religious books and studying theology for two years.

Soheil Arabi, 31, was arrested by members of the Iranian revolutionary guards in November 2013 in connection with Facebook postings which the Iranian judiciary deemed insulting to the founder of Islam. He was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death.

A higher court annulled his death penalty, and his new sentence, which includes a 90-day jail term, emerged this week. Arabi will not be coming out of prison time any time soon, as he is also serving a separate seven-and-a-half-year sentence for allegedly insulting the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, alongside similar charges.

The commuting of Arabi's death sentence is the first such decision to have been taken by a judiciary court in Iran. It is not clear how many people are on death row in the country for blasphemy, heresy or other religious grounds. Last year a 37-year-old man was executed after being found guilty of insulting the prophet Jonah, making "innovations in the religion" and "spreading corruption on earth". He had interpreted Jonah's story in the Qur'an as a symbolic tale.

The state-owned Jamejam newspaper said Arabi was required to prepare a five-10-page summary of each of the 13 religious books he must read. He then has to write an article about religion and reference at least five -10 of those books. He should study theology for two years and report to the authorities every three months on his progress.

Amnesty welcomed the development but said Arabi should not have been jailed in the first place. Nassim Papayiann, Amnesty's campaigner on Iran, said: "International law clearly protects the right to criticise political leaders and religious institutions, even if the criticisms are thought to be shocking or offensive. A sentence that requires an individual to serve time in prison, study theology and read certain books as a punishment, if handed down for peacefully exercised their freedom of expression, clearly tramples over a range of rights, including the right to freedom of belief."

Amnesty has raised alarms in recent years about Iran's ongoing crackdown on internet users, especially those active on Facebook. "The increasing, and sometimes creative, ways in which the Iranian authorities are cracking down on freedom of expression, particularly on social media, is truly alarming and goes counter to the fundamental principles of human rights," Papayianni said.

Iran's judiciary, dominated by hardliners, operates independently of President Hassan Rouhani's government and is at times at odds with the administration's drive for more social freedoms. Some analysts believe that the judiciary is tightening its grip to send a signal that it is will resist Rouhani's repeated calls for reform. Rouhani, meanwhile, has largely remained quiet about human rights violations in the country.

Iran's persecution of the Baha'i has been met by silence from Rouhani and the world

QZ.com (28.09.2015) - <http://qz.com/512393/irans-persecution-of-the-bahai-has-been-met-by-silence-from-rouhani-and-the-world/> - In all my years as an Iranian-American, I have never heard so much discussion about Iran. In the halls of Congress, on the Sunday morning talk shows, at any number of academic and civil society events over the last several months, experts have analyzed, opined on, condemned and supported the international negotiations with Iran. Ahead of the UN General Assembly meeting in September—where President Rouhani is set to speak today, alongside other world leaders—it's time for the voice of conscience to emerge from this din.

Now that the P5+1 and Iran have reached a nuclear deal, we need to pay more attention to Iran's human rights crisis. It would be far too easy for Iran's legacy of abuse and repression to slip by unnoticed once the spotlight dims on its nuclear program. How will the US leverage its renewed relationship with Iran to advance a human rights agenda? Will the international community continue to press Iran to protect the rights of minorities, journalists and dissidents? These are questions we need to hear answered by the US and other major players.

By all indications, the human rights situation in Iran has actually worsened since Rouhani took office in Aug. 2013. Rouhani campaigned as a moderate and promised to improve what he called "citizens' rights." Initially, the prospects that he would follow through on these pledges looked good. He made some overtures immediately after taking office, including releasing a handful of political prisoners before he attended the UN General Assembly in Sep. 2013 and wishing a happy new year to Iran's Jewish community on Twitter.

Yet, human rights advocates worry that this rhetoric has lulled the international community into a false sense of security for the remainder of Rouhani's tenure. Even a cursory look at the facts on the ground demonstrates that fundamental rights in Iran have deteriorated on his watch. Executions have jumped dramatically, including for juveniles and those convicted of less serious crimes, such as drug possession. Women have been the victims of a wave of acid attacks, to which lawmakers responded with a bill that would further empower officials to police Islamic dress. The government continues to jail journalists, among them Washington Post reporter Jason Rezaian. And ethnic and religious minorities have faced increased persecution. In March of this year, Iran again went before the UN Human Rights Council, where Ahmed Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur on Iran, noted that conditions in Iran are deteriorating, despite Rouhani's pledges to make improvements.

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Current situation of Baha'is in Iran

Iran Press Watch (25.09.2015) - <http://iranpresswatch.org/post/13026/> - Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Baha'is have been systematically persecuted as a matter of government policy. During the first decade of this persecution, more than 200 Baha'is were killed or executed, hundreds more were tortured or imprisoned, and tens of thousands lost jobs, access to education, and other rights – all solely because of their religious belief.

Government-led attacks on the country's largest non-Muslim religious minority have re-intensified in the last decade. Since 2005, more than 800 Baha'is have been arrested, and the number of Baha'is in prison has risen from fewer than five to more than 70. The list of prisoners includes all seven members of a former leadership group serving the Baha'i community of Iran. In 2010, the seven were wrongly sentenced to 20 years in prison, which is the longest term currently facing any prisoner of conscience in Iran. The constant threat of raids, arrests, and detention or imprisonment is among the main features of Iran's persecution of Baha'is today.

Other types of persecution include economic and educational discrimination, strict limits on the right to assemble and worship, and the dissemination of anti-Baha'i propaganda in the government-led news media. Attacks on Baha'is or Baha'i-owned properties go unprosecuted and unpunished, creating a sense of impunity for attackers. Since 2005, for example, there have been at least 52 incidents of arson against Baha'i properties, crimes for which no one has been arrested. During the same period, 42 incidents of vandalism at Baha'i cemeteries have been recorded. As noted by a top UN human rights official, the government-led persecution spans "all areas of state activity, from family law provisions to schooling, education, and security." Put another way: the oppression of Iranian Baha'is extends from cradle to grave.

The situation facing Baha'is has not changed since the coming to power of President Hassan Rouhani in August 2013, despite his promises to end religious discrimination. Since his inauguration, at least 108 Baha'is have been arrested, 22 Baha'is have been expelled from university, and at least 180 Baha'i-owned businesses have been shut down or been threatened. More than 6,300 pieces of anti-Baha'i propaganda have been disseminated in the Iranian media during his administration.

Imprisonments

There are currently 74 Baha'is in prison, all on false charges related solely to their religious belief. The list includes all seven Baha'i leaders, who currently remain in prison, serving wrongful 20-year sentences for allegedly "disturbing national security," "spreading propaganda against the regime," and "engaging in espionage."

Their arrests in 2008 and sentencing in 2010 provoked an international outcry and are the longest sentences of any current prisoners of conscience in Iran. In December 2013, the seven wrote to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to express their views on his proposed "Iranian Charter of Citizen's Rights."

Economic Pressure

Economic pressure on Iran's Baha'i community is acute, with both jobs and business licenses being denied to Baha'is. Government jobs, including not only in the civil service but also in such fields as education and law, have been denied to Baha'is since the years immediately following the Revolution and Muslims often are pressured to fire Baha'is in their employment in the private sector.

Since 2007, the Baha'i International Community has documented more than 650 incidents of economic persecution against Iranian Baha'is. These include shop closings, dismissals, the revocation of business licenses and other efforts to block Baha'is from earning a livelihood. Recent examples include the following:

In April and May 2015, authorities closed more than 35 shops in the cities of Rafsanjan, Kerman, Sari, and Hamadan, in an effort to pressure Baha'is not to observe their religious holy days. This followed an earlier episode, in October 2014, when 79 Bahá'í-owned shops in Kerman, Rafsanjan, and Jiroft, were sealed by the authorities. They owners had all closed their businesses to observe a Baha'i Holy Day, which apparently triggered the action. The authorities placed banners at the shops asserting that the owners had violated the rules governing business and trade practices. The fact that so many banners were ready for use points clearly to the fact that the attacks on Bahá'í-owned businesses were systematic and planned ahead of time. In January 2015, most of those shops were allowed to re-open, only to have many closed again in April and May 2015.

In April 2013, the BIC received reports that some four Baha'i-owned shops in Birjand were closed and sealed by authorities. Business permits for other Baha'is there were denied or denied renewal. In January 2013, the BIC received reports that the manager at a Baha'i-owned elevator company in Isfahan was summoned by the office of Public Places Supervision Office and threatened to provide a list of all of his employees and their religions as well as a list of all similar Baha'i-owned companies. The office of Public Places Supervision Office in Isfahan has collected the names and addresses of all the Baha'i-owned optometry shops, including a list of their employees and their religions. And a large, Baha'i-owned distributor of hygiene products in Tehran was closed down resulting in 70 employees losing their jobs. The Baha'i owner was threatened against filing complaints.

Attacks and assaults

On 3 February 2014, three Baha'is were stabbed in their home in the city of Birjand by an unidentified intruder. The attacker, who was wearing a mask, entered the home of Ghodratollah Moodi and his wife, Touba Sabzehjou, at about 8 pm, attacking them with a knife or sharp instrument. He also assaulted their daughter, Azam Moodi, before fleeing. All three were seriously injured; Ms. Moodi managed to summon help and all three were taken to a local hospital in serious condition.

On 7 November 2014, unidentified individuals broke into a Baha'i home in the village of Amzajerd in the province of Hamadan and set a fire. Furniture, papers and some money were destroyed in the blaze, which was labeled arson by the fire department.

On 3 November 2014, unidentified individuals broke into a Baha'i home in a village of Owj Pelleh in the province of Hamadan. They broke windows, wrote graffiti, and attempted to set fire to the house, which was unoccupied at the time.

On 2 October 2014, unknown individuals threw a firebomb at the home of a Baha'i in Yazd. Fortunately, the bomb did not ignite. A second firebomb attack on the home of another Baha'i in Yazd occurred three nights later, on 5 October, starting a fire that was quickly extinguished. The police were informed of both attacks but did not investigate.

Murder of a Baha'i in Bandar Abbas

On 24 August 2013, a well-known member of the Baha'i community of the city of Bandar Abbas in southern Iran was murdered. The body of Mr. Ataollah Rezvani was found, shot in the back of the head, in his car in an isolated location near the railway station on the outskirts of Bandar Abbas. Every indication is that Mr. Rezvani's murder was religiously motivated. His killing came after a series of incidents that were apparently designed to force him and his family to leave the city. He had been under pressure from agents of the Ministry of Intelligence, who instigated his dismissal from a job in water purification. Recently, he had begun to receive menacing telephone calls from unknown persons. This came against a backdrop of attacks on Baha'is from the pulpit by local clerics in the past several years. The Baha'i International Community has said the murder should be treated as a hate crime, and it has called for an investigation. Since 2005 in Iran, at least nine Baha'is have been murdered or died under suspicious circumstances.

Raids and arrests

Since 2005, more than 800 Iranian Baha'is have been arrested. Most of the arrests and detentions follow a similar pattern: Agents of the Ministry of Intelligence arrive at the homes of Baha'is, search the premises, confiscate items such as computers and books, and then make arrests.

In April 2015, for example, 13 Baha'is were arrested in Hamadan. The arrests came over a period of two weeks, as intelligence agents raided and searched a number of Baha'i homes there. Owners/occupants were arrested on charges such as "engaging in propaganda against the regime." Most were released within a day or so after posting large sums for bail, ranging from US\$8,000 to US\$20,000. One woman, however, was detained for nine days in solitary confinement.

On 11 August 2014, five Baha'is were arrested in Tehran during a raid on an optical shop. Arrested were shop owners Aladdin (Niki) Khanjani and Babak Mobasher, along with three employees, Naser Arshi-Moghaddam, Ataollah Ashrafi and Rouhollah Monzavi. Mr. Khanjani is the son of Jamaluddin Khanjani, one of the seven Baha'i leaders who are currently serving 20 year prison sentences on false charges including espionage. Agents also confiscated their computers and other electronic devices and took a large amount of goods and products from their shop.

Other incidents involving the arrest and detention of Baha'is in recent months include:

- On 5 August 2014, government agents in Shiraz arrested four Baha'is. Vahid Dana, Saeid Abedi, and Bahiyyeh Moeinipour were arrested at their homes, while Adib Haqzabzuh was arrested at his workplace. To date, no information has been received about their whereabouts or status.
- On 27 July 2014, a Baha'i in Vilashahr was arrested and beaten after refusing to work on a secret computer program for the Revolutionary Guards.
- On 8 July 2014, Saghi Fadaie was summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence office in Mashhad. After a few hours she was taken to her home, where agents searched her belongings and took her into detention.
- On 2 June 2014, three Baha'is were arrested in Mashhad. Their names are May Kholousi, Dori Amri, and Shayan Tafazoli.

Following raids on 14 Baha'i homes in the Iranian city of Abadeh on 13 October 2013, government agents summoned the occupants for questioning and urged them to leave town or face possible deadly attacks from city residents. Agents from the Shiraz office of the Ministry of Intelligence, with agents from Abadeh, launched the raids at about 8 am on 13 October 2013. The homes were searched, and Baha'i books, CDs, computers, and other items, including photographs, were confiscated. During questioning, several Baha'is were told that local residents "don't like you" and that "when you are on the street, they might attack you and your children with knives." But all evidence says the hate is instigated by the Government; Abadeh residents have good relations with Baha'is.

Destruction of historic Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz

In April 2014, it was learned that elements of Iran's Revolutionary Guards had begun destruction of a historic Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz, apparently to make way for a new sports and cultural center. After the excavation of a large but shallow hole, demolition was halted for several months in the face of international pressure and the expression of outrage on the part of Iranians from all walks of life.

But in August 2014, reports emerged from Iran saying that the Revolutionary Guards had resumed construction on the site, removing human remains from some 30 to 50 graves and pouring a concrete foundation for the complex, which will reportedly include a library, mosque, restaurant, theatre, child care facility, and sports hall. The cemetery is the resting place of some 950 Baha'is, many of whom were historic or prominent figures in the Baha'i community of Iran. Interred at the site, for example, are ten Baha'i women whose cruel hanging in 1983 came to symbolize the government's deadly persecution of Baha'is.

In September 2014, three high level UN human rights experts called for a halt to the cemetery's destruction, a plea that has so far gone unheeded.

In addition to the demolition of the Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz, there have been in recent months other attacks. On 12 December 2013, the Baha'i cemetery in Sanandaj was partly destroyed. Reports from Iran say the morgue, where bodies are washed, along with the prayer room, a water tank, and the walls of the cemetery were destroyed, apparently as the result of a long-running government effort to confiscate the cemetery land and raze its buildings. In Semnan recently, attackers destroyed the Baha'i cemetery there in two stages. In October/November 2012, intruders demolished the morgue and in December 2012/January 2013, they covered all the graves 40 centimeters deep in dirt using bulldozers. The municipality whose bulldozers were used for this purpose denied

knowledge of the incident and promised to repair the damage. In December 2012, the Baha'i cemetery in Yazd was vandalized.

Persecution in education

Baha'i school children at all levels continue to be monitored and slandered by administrators and teachers in schools. Secondary school students often face pressure and harassment, and some have been threatened with expulsion. Religious studies teachers are known to insult and ridicule Baha'i beliefs. In a few reported cases, when Baha'i students attempt to clarify matters at the request of their peers, they are summoned to the school authorities and threatened with expulsion if they continue to "teach" their Faith. Young Baha'is continue to be denied access to public and private colleges and universities in Iran as a matter of official policy, which requires that they be expelled if they manage to enroll and school authorities learn that they are Baha'is. Those working in support of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), an ad hoc, volunteer effort of the Iranian Baha'i community to provide education for its young people, have been at various times arrested, harassed and imprisoned.

In September 2014, for example, Ms. Shadan Shirazi was blocked from entering university despite the fact that she placed 113th on national college entrance examinations. The story was widely reported and reveals a new tactic undertaken by the government, which is to deprive Baha'is of any document or paper that they can use to prove they were discriminated against because of their religion.

Other recent incidents of discrimination in education include the September 2014 expulsion of a Baha'i from Baharestan University in Esfahan and an August 2014 expulsion from Payame-Noor University.

Incitement to hatred

Over the years, thousands of pieces of anti-Baha'i propaganda have been disseminated in official or semi-official Iranian media. These include anti-Baha'i articles, videos, and webpages. A report, *Inciting Hatred*, covering a period from December 2009 through May 2011, documents the nature of these attacks. These attacks have not slowed or abated. From January 2014 through May 2015, the BIC documented more than 6,300 items of anti-Baha'i propaganda in Iran's official or semi-official media.

Other forms of Persecution

Other forms of persecution faced by Iranian Baha'is include the monitoring of their bank accounts, movements, and activities; the denial of pensions or rightful inheritances; the intimidation of Muslims who associate with Baha'is; the denial of access to publishing or copying facilities for Baha'i literature; and the unlawful confiscation or destruction of Baha'i properties, including Baha'i holy places.

International reaction

Governments, organizations and individual supporters around the world are calling for the release of jailed Baha'i leaders and Baha'i educators, and an end to the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran.

In March 2015, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and Ahmed Shaheed, the special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, told the Human Rights Council that discrimination against minorities in Iran, including Baha'is, continues unabated.

In December 2014, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution expressing "deep concern" about serious ongoing and recurring human rights violations" in Iran. The six-

page resolution listed the high frequency of executions, torture, restrictions on freedom of assembly and expression, the targeting of journalists, pervasive gender inequality, and religious discrimination – including against Iranian Baha'is – as among the Assembly's concerns.

On 31 October 2014, governments repeatedly called attention to Iran's lack of respect for religious freedom at Iran's Universal Periodic Review in the Human Rights Council. Of the 291 recommendations made by 104 governments, 11 specifically mentioned the situation of Iranian Baha'is, calling on Iran to end discrimination against them.

In September 2014, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and human rights expert Ahmed Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, both issued reports on human rights in Iran. Both expressed concern about the lack of progress, and both specifically discussed the ongoing persecution of Iranian Baha'is.

In September 2014, three high-level United Nations human rights experts called on Iran to halt the ongoing destruction of a historic Baha'i cemetery in Shiraz, Iran, saying the action is an "unacceptable" violation of freedom of religion. In a joint news release, Heiner Bielefeldt, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, and Rita Izsak, the UN Independent Expert on minority issues, said they were "dismayed" at reports that demolition work had resumed in August.

In March 2014, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Ahmed Shaheed issued reports to the UN Human Rights Council stating that discrimination against Iranian Baha'is continues to persist in Iran. They cited continuing imprisonments, arbitrary arrests and detentions, ongoing exclusion from higher education, and hostility in the legal system.

In June 2013, the International Labor Organization expressed "deep concern" over continuing economic and educational discrimination against Baha'is in Iran.

In May 2013, four high-level United Nations human rights experts called on Iran to immediately release the seven imprisoned Baha'i leaders.

Also in May 2013, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended that Iran ensure that all citizens, regardless of religious belief, enjoy full rights without any discrimination. The Committee specifically referred to the Baha'i community, expressing its concern that Iranian Baha'is face "widespread and entrenched discrimination, including denial of access to employment in the public sector, institutions of higher education, as well as to benefits of the pension system." It recommended that Iran "take steps to ensure that members of the Baha'i community are protected against discrimination and exclusion in every field."

Details of the arrests and the condition of Christian detainees in Karaj

Following the home invasion by plain-clothes security officers at a gathering of new Christian converts in the city of Karaj, at least 8 people were arrested and no information is available of their whereabouts.

Mohabat News (15.08.2015) - <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=2464> - According to reports published by Mohabat News on Friday August 7, 2015, plain-clothes officers invaded a house church in Karaj, and some of the members of the group who had gathered for a worship service were arrested.

During an interview with Mohabat News, an informed source mentioned that more than 15 security officers were involved in the invasion and the arrest of these Christians.

Esmayeel Fallahi, Nematollah Yousefi, Shahin Bashiri, Mona Chardooli, Razmik and Haydeh were named among the detainees.

It was said that these arrests were organized by the security forces of the ministry of information, and these detainees were taken to an unknown location for further interrogations. There is no information on their whereabouts or their physical condition, but an unofficial source has indicated that the detainees have been taken to the headquarters of the ministry of information.

After a week of relentless pursuit, the efforts from the family members of the detainees with judicial and security authorities has been futile and unsuccessful.

Other unverified reports seem to indicate that three of the detainees have been temporarily and conditionally released by posting appropriate bail.

It has also been reported that security forces made attempts to round up other members of this underground church and arrest them.

Plain-clothes officers, who were equipped with personal hand guns and radio communicators, took away some of these Christian converts from their homes without ever producing any court or other legal orders of arrest and proceeded to search their homes.

Esmayeel Falaahi, a 35 year old man, married with 2 children, was one of the people arrested who had is home searched, and his personal belongings such as his computer, several Bibles, other Christian literature, and several DVDs were seized and taken away.

These arrests are mainly due to the Christian beliefs held by these individuals, and their participation in home fellowships reflects the ever-increasing pressure on the Iranian Christians of Iran.

Ahmad Shahid, the special human rights reporter on Iran for the United Nations, in the 28th conference of the United Nations on the subject of ongoing suppression of religious and prisoners of conscience warned of the crisis of Iran's blatant violation of the human rights of minorities. Military and their affiliated security apparatuses continue to persecute newly Christian converts and block their access to Christian websites. These detainees are often subjected to harsh interrogations and often by being threatened to be execution endure nightmarish physical and psychological torture.

Non-Trinitarian cult member received early release from prison

Alireza Seyyedian, a member of the Non-Trinitarian Branhamist cult, received pardon from Iranian authorities and was released from prison after more than three and a half years in Karaj's Rajaei-Shahr prison.

Mohabat News (10.08.2015) – <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=2455> - Alireza Seyyedian had been sentenced to six years in prison for alleged "actions against Iran's national security". However, he received a pardon and was released on July 27, 2015 after serving more than three and a half years in prison.

The authorities granted Mr. Seyyedian an early release only after a year in prison on the occasion of the Islamic Republic Day. They said the pardon is granted on the basis of Mr. Seyyedian being his old mother's guardian in addition to his own family.

Mr. Seyyedian is a member of a non-Trinitarian cult who call themselves the "Church of Iran". He was arrested on March 14, 2012 on his way to leave the country for Nowruz holidays. He was tried in branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court and was sentenced to six year in prison for "action against national security through collusion and gatherings".

According to his lawyer, he was charged with other accusations as well, including distribution of videos of baptism and speaking about them. The lawyer said, "The judge's ruling was that all his actions were in line with actions against Iran's national security".

Earlier, on October 8 2014, Mr. Seyyedian together with seven other prisoners of conscience, including Christian prisoner Ebrahim Firouzi were transferred from Evin to Rajaei-Shahr prison.

According to ISNA (Iranian Students' News Agency), Mohsen Eje'i, spokesman of the Iranian Judiciary, said in a press conference on August 3, "20 security convicts received pardon on Eid-al-Fitr [one of the most important Islamic feasts], 16 of whom were released immediately and four received a reduction in their term". Mr. Eje'i did not mention the names of these convicts. "Security convict" is a term Iranian officials use to refer to political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.

Behnam Irani

Behnam Irani is another prisoner affiliate with the non-Trinitarian group. He has been in prison for five years and just recently received a leave permit on July 4th. He was supposed to return to prison on August 7, but there has been no news so far as to whether he has returned or not. There is a hope for him to be pardoned as well, as he suffers from health problems and underwent a surgery while in prison.

Mr. Irani was arrested for a second time in April 2010 and sentenced to one year in prison for security charges. That one year conviction activated an older five year suspended sentence, making his total sentence six years.

11 Human rights organizations condemned the destruction of Sunni place of worship in Tehran

HRANA News Agency (09.08.2015) - <https://hra-news.org/en/statements/11-human-rights-organizations-condemned-destruction-sunnis-place-worship-tehran> - 11 Human Rights organizations have condemned the destruction of Sunnis' place of worship in Tehran in a statement and called on international organization and Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran to react to these actions of Iranian government. The full text of the statement is as follows:

Human Rights Organizations' Statement in Condemning the Destruction of Sunnis' Place of Worship in Tehran

After 3 decades of governing of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Sunni citizens have no mosques in Tehran to pray and worship. Although the 12th article of the Iranian constitution states that "all the non-Shiite religious fates are totally respected and their followers are free to practice their fates" the discriminative policies on Sunnis has increased so much that the "rented houses" which are used by them as "places of worship" are being closed or destroyed by extrajudicial forces.

In a significant example, on the morning of Wednesday, July 29, 2015 the municipal authorities while being backed by the police and security forces destroyed a large part of a Sunni place of worship in Punak of Tehran.

There are few points to be paid attention to in this regard:

1. The estimated population of Sunnis in Tehran is hundreds of thousands, however they are not allowed to have a mosque in the Iranian Capital. Tehran can be known as the only Islamic Capital in the world where there is no Sunni mosque.
2. Because of the tremendous and increasing pressure on the Sunni population of Tehran, their places of worship are also not official. They are in fact some "rented houses" being used as a place of worship.
3. The Sunnis' central place of worship in Tehran was the "Punak place of worship" which was being used as a place for daily, Friday and Eid prayers by the Sunnis. It was already closed several times.
4. On January 17, 2015 the municipal and police forces closed this place of worship. A week before on January 10 and simultaneously with the "Islamic Unity Conference" in Tehran the security forces prevented Molavi Abdolhamid Ismailzahi, Sunni Friday prayers Imam of Zahedan, from holding prayers in this house.
5. By the consistency of Sunni Imams the house was reopened after a while but it was still not allowed to hold Friday and Eid prayers in it.
6. Despite all these limits finally some parts of the ground floor and the cellar which was used as the rest room were destroyed.

Since prohibiting daily, Friday and Eid prayers and destruction of places of worship and limiting religious practices are against the UN Human Rights Charter and are considered to be an obvious violation of Human Rights and Rights of Freedom of Expression and Thought, we condemn it and call for judicial investigations and holding the perpetrators accountable. This act was totally illegal and against the 12th article of the constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran. We call on Iranian authorities to reconstruct the house and take the required measurements to make sure the Sunni population will have their religious rights as well as Shiites and other fates and put an end to the discriminations against the Sunnis.

We also call on Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran to react to these actions of Iranian government and Mr. Heiner Bielefeldt, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and all international organizations and human rights activists to express their official objection to the violation of Sunni population in Iran.

Unity for Iran

Human Rights and Democracy Association for Iran – Hamburg

Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation

The Association to Defend Human Rights and Democracy – Sweden

Iran Human Rights

Human Rights Organization of Kurdistan

Verein Südwind in Human Rights Council

The Baloch Activists Campaign

Human Rights Committee of Iranian Researchers Association

Human Rights Activists in Iran

Iran Human Rights Documentation Center

Iran pastor Fathi's appeal fails, against extra year in prison and 74 lashes

World Watch Monitor (02.06.2015) –

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/06/3878521/> - An Iranian pastor serving a six-year prison term has failed in his appeal against a further sentence of 74 lashes and an additional year in jail - for the alleged possession in his cell of two litres of alcohol. This latest news about Farshid Fathi was first reported by Iran-focused Mohabat News on 30th May.

Middle East Concern (MEC) reports that the alcohol was found on Fathi's prison ward in April 2014 during a raid by guards when he was in Evin Prison. MEC says that security officials attributed the alcohol to Farshid, who strongly denies this claim.

Such cases are usually addressed by a judicial court but Fathi's case was submitted to the Revolutionary Court. Fathi, who has been in prison since 2010, denied the accusation when he appeared in the court in December 2014, after he had been transferred to Rajaei-Shahr prison in August 2014.

His lawyer's appeal has now failed to overturn the original 'extra' sentence from December.

About 60 other Christians, many belonging to house churches in Tehran and other cities, were arrested at the same time as Fathi on the day after Christmas in 2010. Most of those have now been released.

The governor of Tehran, Morteza Tamadon on January 4, 2011 described the detained Christians as "extremists" who "penetrate the body of Islam like corrupt and deviant

Fathi, who is a 35 year old father of two, was imprisoned without trial in Evin prison. After 15 months of uncertainty he was tried in January 2012, being accused of "action against the regime's security, being in contact with foreign organisations, and religious propaganda" according to a source. Details of his court trial have not been published.

Iran's Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei had made a speech in October 2010 saying that house churches should be dealt with. A new wave of surveillance and arrests against Christians followed soon after, with leaders of house church groups such as Farshid Fathi especially singled out for longer detentions. Born into a Muslim family, Fathi became a Christian at the age of 17 and at the time of his arrest in 2010 he was working full time as a pastor and leader of house churches.

Fathi is serving his sentence alongside another man, Alireza Seyyadian, who was also imprisoned for six years. Seyyadian was arrested as he was trying to leave the country

for a Persian New Year vacation in March 2012, and was also transferred with Fathi to Rajaei-Shahr prison.

Seyyadian is a member of a group known as Church of Iran, which holds a non-Trinitarian theology. He was sentenced to 90 lashes and six years' imprisonment for acting against national security through collusion, gathering and propagating against the Islamic regime.

World Watch Monitor has reported on how the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office has previously labelled Fathi's prison conditions as "harsh".

Beaten up

He suffered a fractured foot and toe after being beaten up by security officials during the raid in which the alcohol was found and attributed to him.

Estimates from evidence provided by the American Center for Law and Justice, Article 18 and Middle East Concern, suggest that in May 2015 there were 90 people detained in Iranian prisons on account of their Christian faith and practice.

Several UN special reports and resolutions have condemned the violation of the rights of religious minorities. Prison authorities have sometimes discriminated against Christian detainees.

In Rajaei-Shahr prison, for instance, Christian prisoners were refused permission to participate in the prison Christmas celebrations.

Other prisoners have also had to face additional sentences. Ebrahim Firouzi had been due for release on 13th January, but has been kept in prison and was retried on 8th March of charges of 'acting against national security, gathering, and collusion'.

According to the 2015 World Watch List by Open Doors International, a charity that supports Christians who face hostilities because of their faith, Iran ranks seventh (up two points from last year) in the top ten countries where Christians are persecuted.

The main driver of persecution in Iran, it says, is 'Islamic extremism'; Christians from an Islamic background are especially targeted. Increasing numbers of Farsi [Persian] speaking churches have been forced to close; some of which have been there for both decades and centuries. This is a development that has not been seen in the history of the church in Iran, stated the World Watch List.

"Expectations were high when President Rouhani took office in 2013. However, his powers are limited and in the short run, no concrete changes are expected for religious minorities" says Open Doors.

Mohabat News reports that even Sunni Muslims cannot enjoy the least amount of freedom. As with Christians and other religious minorities, Sunnis are not allowed to build a mosque of their own in Tehran, the capital.

Eighteen Iranian Christian converts sentenced to a total of 23 years in prison

Mohabat News (25.05.2015) <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=2137> - The Revolutionary Courts in Esfahan, Rasht, Tonekabon, and Karaj have sentenced 18 Christian converts to

23 years and nine months in total over the past two months. These sentences have been confirmed in an appeals court and are final.

Confirming this report, Mansour Borji, spokesman for the Article 18 Committee, said, "Although these prison sentences are final, some of these Christian converts are determined to appeal again to a higher court".

A number of Christian converts mentioned in this report were arrested in 2013 in Shahin-Shahr near Esfahan. Their names are: Nasrin Kiamarzi, Sarah Fouladi, Maryam Bateninia, Akbar Ahmadi, Bita Ja'fari, Abbas Kiani, Fatemeh Zareie, Masoumeh Dashti, Ramin Bakhtiarvand, Neda Fouladi, Samira Fouladi, and two unnamed individuals. The Revolutionary Court in Esfahan sentenced each of the above mentioned Christians to one year in prison and two years ban to leave the country for evangelism and forming house church gatherings.

Mr. Borji stressed that none of these individuals have a criminal history and they have been found guilty in a court for the first time. He said, "We did not have permission to publish the names of five of these Christian converts, so we just referred to their number and the place of their arrest in Rasht, Tonekabon, and Karaj".

Earlier Mr. Borji had explained that the Christian converts in Esfahan were arrested in a raid on their house church in Shahin-Shahr on February 20, 2013. A month later, they were temporarily released on bail, and were free until their day of trial.

Regarding the current situation of Christians in Iran, Mr. Borji said, "The Islamic regime of Iran treats Christians cruelly, while Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad-Javad Zarif, claims that no one is in jail in Iran for their beliefs. Despite President Rouhani's promises in his campaign, not only do we see no relief of suppression of Christians, but we see an increase in the number of arrests and unfair sentences and the security atmosphere imposed by the Islamic regime on the Iranian Christian community still continues.

The first 2015 report by Ahmad Shaheed, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, indicates a decline in the situation of Iranian Christians. According to the report, as of January 1, 2015, at least 92 Christians have been arrested or are awaiting trial for their faith. By comparison in 2014, 69 Christian converts were arrested by Iranian authorities and held in jail for at least 24 hours.

This is all happening while Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, stated in his visit with the religious minority members of the Islamic Majlis (Parliament), that based on Islamic teachings, "followers of other religions should be treated with justice and fairness". Although Iran's Islamic regime does everything in its power to impose and promote Shi'ite Islam as the state religion, to pressure religious minorities and punish conversion out of Islam with capital punishment, the trend among Iranian Shi'ite Muslims to convert to other religions, especially Christianity, is ever increasing.

Global campaign on 7th anniversary of arrest of seven Iranian Baha'i leaders

BWNS (14.05.2015) - The Baha'i International Community has today launched a campaign to mark the seventh anniversary of the wrongful arrest and imprisonment of the seven former Baha'i leaders in Iran.

The campaign will run [until 21 May 2015](#). Events are being planned around the world by

Baha'i communities and others to call attention to the plight of the seven, who were arrested in 2008. The plight of some 90 other Baha'is in Iran - as well as other prisoners of conscience there - will also be highlighted.

"What the events of the past year have demonstrated ever more clearly to the people of Iran and others from around the world who promote peace and concord is the stark contrast between the peaceful intentions and selfless service of the Baha'i community and the lamentable and inhuman acts of those who, under the influence of ignorant religious prejudice, continue to perpetrate injustices against you," wrote the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Baha'i Faith, in a letter to Baha'is in Iran earlier this month.

The campaign will take the theme "Seven Days in Remembrance of Seven Years for the Seven Baha'i Leaders." Each day in the next seven days, events will focus on a different member of the seven, who are Mahvash Sabet, Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Vahid Tizfahm.

Facebook event pages in English and Persian have been set up as rallying points and a hashtag has been designated: #7Bahais7years. There is more background at www.bic.org/7Bahais7years

The seven formed the entire membership of the now-disbanded ad hoc group tending to the spiritual and social needs of the Iranian Baha'i community in the absence of formally elected Baha'i leadership, which was banned in 1983.

Ms. Sabet was arrested on 5 March 2008, while the other six were arrested on 14 May 2008. In 2010, the seven were tried and wrongfully convicted on charges of "espionage" and "spreading propaganda against the regime," among other false accusations. They were sentenced to 20 years in prison, the longest terms of any current prisoners of conscience in Iran.

To read the article online, view photographs and access links:
<http://news.bahai.org/story/1053>

HRWF Prisoners List

The seven Baha'is were on HRWF Prisoners Lists in 2014, 2013 and 2012. The detailed cases of about thirty other Baha'is are to be found at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Iran-FBL-2014.pdf>

Fariba KAMALABADI TAEFI, Jamaloddin KHANJANI, Afif NAIMI, Saeid REZAI, Mahvash SABET, TAZANGI, Behrouz Azizi TAVAKKOLI and Vahid TIZFAHM

Ages: Taefi 50, Khanjani 80, Naimi 51, Tazangi 54, Tavakkoli 61 and Tizfahm 40 years

Date and place of arrest: Sabet on 5th May 2008 all others on 14th May 2008 in Tehran

Charges: Espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, the establishment of an illegal administration, cooperation with Israel and acting against the security of the country

Statement of the defendants: Leaders of the Baha'i community in Iran

Places of detention: Evin (Tehran) and Gohardasht (Karaj)

Court decision: Sentenced to 20 years in prison in August 2010

Other information: In September 2010, the authorities informed the seven Baha'is orally that their 20-year sentences were reduced to 10 years. However, prison authorities told them in March 2011 that their original 20-year sentences had been reinstated.

Two Iranian Christians sentenced to a total of ten years in prison

Mohabat News (01.05.2015) <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=1899> - According to Mohabat News, Branch 28 of the central Revolutionary Court sentenced Ebrahim Firouzi, a Christian convert, to an additional five years in prison. He is already serving another sentence in Rajaei-Shahr prison. The same court sentenced Sevada Aghasar, an Iranian-Armenian Christian, to five years in prison. Mr. Aghasar is currently free on bail.

The Iranian court, announced their new charges as "action against national security through collusion and gathering".

Mr. Firouzi's attorney says, the five year sentence is the highest possible punishment for the charges laid against his client. He also stated that this is an initial ruling and they plan to appeal it.

Ebrahim Firouzi is a Christian prisoner currently held in ward 10 of Rajaei-Shahr prison together with other Christian prisoners. He, as well as his Christian inmates, are held in the same ward as dangerous criminals, which is against the law of classification and separation of inmates. He visited his lawyer for the first time in a court hearing on March 8, 2015.

Mr. Firouzi was initially arrested on August 25, 2013. Prior to that he had been convicted of several charges including propaganda against the Islamic regime, evangelism, contact with anti-Islamic agents abroad and founding a Christian website, for which he was sentenced to one year in prison and two years of exile to the remote town of Sarbaz. Although he completed his initial sentence on January 13, 2015, Iranian authorities kept him in prison for new charges.

Sevada Aghasar is another convict in this case, and was given a five year sentence. He is an Iranian-Armenian resident of Tehran who had been temporarily released on Sunday March 2, 2014, after enduring six months in ward 350 of Evin prison.

Mr. Aghasar appeared in the same court as Mr. Firouzi on March 8, 2015, and was charged with action against national security through collusion and gathering. Mr. Firouzi appeared in court first and Mr. Aghasar was tried immediately after him on the same day. Should the appeal court approve his sentence, Mr. Aghasar will be sent to prison to serve his five year sentence.

A report of Aghasar's arrest, published about two years ago, states that he was arrested together with Ebrahim Firouzi and Masoud Mirzaei on August 21, 2013, as they were meeting in Mr. Mirzaei's work office.

At the time of that arrest, knowledgeable sources told Mohabat News that Ebrahim had said that he was supposed to report to the judicial authorities on Saturday to serve his one year sentence in prison. Thus, the purpose of Ebrahim and Sevada's visit to Masoud's office was solely to visit friends and say goodbye to them. Now, two of these friends are being sentenced to ten years in prison for a simple farewell visitation.

Sevada Aghasar, is an Iranian Armenian citizen and a member of the Armenian Apostolic Church. On another occasion, Aghasari's house had been searched by the authorities and some of his belongings were seized in connection with the arrest of a Christian convert.

According to the first 2015 report of Ahmad Shaheed, UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, at least 92 Christians have been in Iranian prisons for their faith since

January 2015. The report also states that in 2014 alone, 69 Christian converts were arrested and held in custody for at least 24 hours.

Iranian Ayatollah warns against house churches in Iran!

Mohabat News (01.05.2015) <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=1979> - According to Mohabat News, Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani, an Iranian Islamic religious expert who is known for his exaggerations, warned against anti-Shi'ite activities in Khuzestan province (western Iran). He told Islamic seminary students and professors of the Islamic seminary of Masjed-Soleiman in the religious institute of Imam-Sadeq in Qom, "Enemies of the Islamic revolution and the Islamic regime of Iran are investing money and providing means to make the people of Khuzestan turn their back on Shi'ite Islam. However, we should be cautious, and not let house churches be planted, or Wahhabis promote their faith in people's homes".

Ayatollah Sobhani, whose speeches are mostly reflected in the Revolutionary Guard supported media, like Farsi news agency, had stood strongly against Christianity in the past. By giving false statistics and information he had tried to provoke security authorities and intelligence services into pressuring Christians and Ayatollah Sobhani in Iran.

As one of the professors at the Islamic seminary of Qom, he had already warned against a growing tendency towards Christianity among Iranian youth and acknowledged that 600 young people in Neishabour have become Christians. In another instance, during a Quran interpretation session in Qom, he said, "If Christians are willing, we are ready to have a debate with them today".

The increasing tendency of Iranian society towards Christianity, especially in recent years, has become a major concern for the Islamic regime and more specifically for the Shi'ite religious system. One of the means the Islamic regime uses to eliminate non-Shi'ite religious including Christianity, is to raise unsubstantiated accusations, ranging from insulting to moral and financial accusations or spying for the U.K. and Israel.

On the other hand, pro-regime Islamic clerics create a wave of unsubstantiated claims to provoke government and intelligence officials, to try to prevent Christianity from growing in Iran.

Suppression and "Climate of fear" reign in Iran for religious minorities

By Kyle Wagner for Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (28.04.2015) - "Iranians must unite to liberate their country and the Middle East from this nightmare," declared Dr Sanabargh Zahedi, an Islamic scholar and opposition leader in Iran. He was speaking of the repressive regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which was established in 1979, following the revolution that deposed the Shah. Since that time, the human rights of Iranian citizens have been systematically violated and the activities of religious minorities severely curtailed.

Zahedi's remarks were made at a conference at the European Parliament on religious freedom in Iran, which took place on 22nd April under the sponsorship of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). MEPs Andrew Lewer and Peter Van Dalen organised the event on behalf of the ECR's internal working group on the freedom of religion. Christians, Baha'is and other minority religious and belief groups live daily in a "climate of fear," said Lewer, despite hopes for reform after the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013. While world attention has been riveted on the outcome of nuclear negotiations with Iran, grave violations of human rights continue to be perpetrated against religious believers that are viewed by the regime as being fundamentally at odds with the state.

Harrowing testimony was presented by several speakers, many of whom remained anonymous in order to ensure their security in Iran. Chrissy Taylor of Elam Ministries told stories of Christians whose homes had been raided by security forces, who were beaten, arrested and sentenced to prison for their faith. Human Rights Without Frontiers has documented several of these cases in its 2014 world report on freedom of religion or belief.

Rachel Bayani, representative to the European Union for the Baha'i International Community, appealed for states and international organisations to view Iran's treatment of the Baha'is as a litmus test to determine Iran's sincerity in other international negotiations, including the ongoing nuclear negotiations. She noted that any mention of the Baha'is promptly ends all discussion with Iranian diplomats and officials. Despite this she feels that this is a conversation that must be had and cannot be allowed to die.

John O'Rourke of the European External Action Service (EEAS) offered a variant opinion, saying that the international community is limited in its ability to change the domestic policies of sovereign states. The best way to improve the standings of religious minorities in Iran, he said, is to continue open discussions without explicitly bringing the issue to bear on relations with Iran.

The use of "push" or "pull" factors for changing the situation of religion and belief minorities in Iran will be largely determined by EU and US decision makers; however, the clear consensus at the conference was that increased attention is urgently needed toward those in Iran who suffer discrimination and repression for reason of religion or belief.

Christian convert conditionally released before Persian new year

Mohabat News (28.03.2015)

http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10076:christian-convert-conditionally-released-before-persian-new-year&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279 - Mojtaba Seyyed-Alaedin Hossein was conditionally released from Adel-Abad prison on March 18, 2015, just a couple of days before Iranian New Year. He endured more than three years in prison.

His conditional release was granted after receiving three months of pardon for his artistic activities in prison.

[Esmaeil \(Homayoun\) Shokouhi](#), another Christian prisoner was also granted a 10 day leave permit. Earlier, on November 10 2014, Mr. Shokouhi was conditionally released after serving 2 years and 8 months in prison. However, a few days after his release, a Revolutionary Court judge announced that this conditional release should not have been granted and requested that Mr. Shokouhi be taken back to prison.

A group of Christians, including [Mojtaba Seyyed-Alaedin Hossein](#), [(Shiraz in Fars province, 934 KMs south of Tehran, the capital)] [Esmail \(Homayoun\) Shokouhi](#), [Vahid Hakkani](#), and [Mohammad-Reza \(Kourosh\) Partoei](#), were arrested on February 8, 2012 during a raid by security authorities on their houses. One of the houses that were raided was being used as a meeting place for Christian believers. The Revolutionary Court of Shiraz sentenced each of these men to three years and eight months in prison for "attending house churches, evangelism, contact with foreign Christian ministries, propaganda against the Islamic regime through evangelism and disrupting national security".

Christians actively evangelizing among Farsi-speaking Iranians have been subject to arrests and severe punishment by the Iranian authorities in recent years.

Mansour Borji, spokesman of the Article 18 committee, believes that raising security accusations against Iranian Christians is used as a cover to justify a crack down on religious activities of Christians in the country. Mr. Borji added, "In order to avoid international controversy, the Iranian regime accuses prisoners of conscience of security charges and restricts their religious freedom through ambiguous and irrational interpretations of law".

In his latest report, Ahmad Shaheed, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, expressed his deep concerns over the violation of religious freedom in Iran and pointed out that currently there are 92 Christian prisoners in Iranian prisons.

Imprisoned Baha'i educator wins Raha Südwind Award

Faran Hesami, Winner of the Raha Sudwind Award

Iran Press Watch (16.03.2015) - www.iranhrc.org - Südwind is dedicated to honor and celebrate individuals who have a share in the promotion and protection of human rights in Iran. Südwind has consultative status with the United Nations in the field of development and narrowing the gap between countries of the global North and South.

This organization, under the All Human Rights for All in Iran project, has designated certain awards to recognize the efforts of human rights activists in Iran. Last year this award (1) was given to Parvin Zabihi, Zhila Karamzadeh Makvandi, Naseem Soltanbeigi, Rasoul Bodaghi, Majid Tavakoli, and Reza Shahabi, and also a special award was offered in memory of the late Faramarz Mohammadi for his anti-war efforts.

The delegation of Südwind judges included Shirin Ebadi, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, lawyer, former judge of the court, and a human rights lawyer; Aaron Rhodes one of the founders and principal investigator of the Freedom Rights Project, and prior executive director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights; Karolina Januszewski, human rights lawyer and member of the Südwind Board of Directors, who elected other individuals from Human Rights Activists in Iran such as the Kordpour brothers and Hakimeh Shokri, and Faran Hesami who is a Baha'i currently in prison, as the winners of the Raha Award.

Faran Hesami is a psychologist and professor at the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), who has been sentenced to four years in prison, and is now serving her sentence in the women's ward of Evin prison.

She completed her study of psychology at BIHE, and went to Canada's Carleton University to pursue a Master's degree in the same field. After returning to Iran, this Baha'i resident began her collaboration with a welfare organization as a family counselor, and continued to serve the people. She expanded her activities by translations and writing educational and training articles for various publications, as well as translations of various books; also she has authored four books in the areas of parenting and sexual abuse of children, which have been published in Iran under her own name Faran Hesami.

Two of her books, "Guide to the treatment of children who have experienced sexual abuse" and "Prevention of child sexual abuse", were reprinted while the author was in prison under charges of conspiring against national security.

Her Husband, Kamran Rahimian, also a graduate of Carleton University, is spending time in Rajai Shahr Prison due to charges of collaboration with BIHE. Currently Kamran Rahimian's mother has parental responsibility for the young child of this Baha'i couple.

Prison on the charge of teaching the Baha'is

Faran Hesami, 39, and her husband were summoned to Branch Five of the Evin Prison Court in the summer of 2011, and were arrested on the spot. Faran Hesami was transferred to the women's ward of Evin Prison on charges of membership in the Baha'i community and gathering and colluding to disturb national security. She was in temporary detention for 77 days, and was released after posting bail of approx \$95,000.

Judge Abolghassem Salvati, head of Branch 15 of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Court, sentenced this Baha'i to four years in prison. This sentence was confirmed by Judge Movahed of Branch 54 of the appeals court in the summer of 2012. On 15 July of the same year, although Ms. Hesami still had not been notified of the outcome of her appeal, as she appeared at Evin prison court to follow up on the case of her husband, she was arrested to start serving her four year sentence. The arrest was made without prior notice, moreover Faran Hesami's request to bid farewell to her three-year-old son was rejected.

Experience of imprisonment and exile in childhood

The parents and sister of this political prisoner had been arrested in late 1980 / early 1981. Faran Hesami, at the age of 9, witnessed security forces invading their home and detaining her father, mother and sister. His father spent 13 months in prison and 5 years in exile.

During her grade school years, she was suspended from school twice due to her belief in the Baha'i religion, and after finishing high school, she studied at BIHE. Since Baha'is have been denied the right to study at universities in Iran, should their Baha'i belief become known, since the Islamic Revolution, the Baha'is established an underground educational institution which afforded the children of these families the possibility of continuing with their higher education. After studying at Carleton University in Canada, she began teaching at this virtual university.

Artin, the imprisoned couple's young son, has been visiting his parents at prison once every few weeks since the age of two.

1. See <http://www.iranhrc.org/?p=1081>
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Former Pastor of Pentecostal Church released from prison

Mohabat news (11.03.2015)

http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9989:former-pastor-of-pentecostal-church-released-from-prison&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279 - Assyrian pastor, Victor Bet-Tamarz and two Christian converts had been arrested as they were celebrating Christmas, on December 26, 2014 in a residential house in northwestern Tehran. All three were eventually released on bail from Evin prison.

Of the three detainees, Amin Afshar Naderi was first released on February 10, 2015 after posting a heavy bail of 100 million Tomans (Approx. 40,000 USD). Mr. Naderi spent 36 days in jail, of which he spent 30 days in solitary confinement. After his release, intelligence officers summoned him once to an unofficial building for additional interrogation. Mr. Naderi is 26 years old and is an employee of the private sector.

The other Christian convert arrested with Pastor Victor is Kavian Fallah Mohammadi. He was released one week after Mr. Naderi on a bail equal to Mr. Naderi's. Iranian authorities explained that the reason for this one week delay between these releases is that Mr. Mohammadi is a resident of a northern province and submission of a title deed to the Revolutionary Court from those provinces takes some time. Only during this one week he was transferred out of solitary confinement and into the general ward of Evin prison.

Pastor Victor Ben-Tamarz was released several days later on March 1, 2015, after enduring 65 days in prison. His release was also made possible by posting an expensive property title deed. All these individuals are only free until the day of their trial. Despite Pastor Victor's old age, he spent most of his jail time in solitary confinement and suffered from numerous health problems. He is still suffering from health problems caused during his imprisonment in Evin prison.

All three Christian men should wait to be summoned to court for their trial and are banned from all Christian activities until that time.

Pastor Victor Bet-Tamarz is the former pastor of the Shahr-Ara Pentecostal Church in Tehran. He served God at that church for more than three decades. In addition to his ministry among Assyrians, he was active among Farsi-speaking Iranians as well. He held Farsi services at his church until security authorities shut them down and dismissed him as the pastor of the church on March 31, 2009. The Assyrian member of Iranian Parliament (Majles), played a key role in the cancellation of Farsi services and dismissal of Pastor Victor.

[Pastor Victor, his wife, their son, as well as 12 Christian converts](#) had gathered on December 26, 2014 to celebrate Christmas, when plain-clothed security authorities raided their gathering. The authorities disrupted the celebration and put them all in custody.

All detainees, but three, were released after a written interrogation and signing a disclaimer on the spot. The three who weren't released, namely Pastor Victor and two Christian converts Amin Afshar Naderi and Kavian Fallah Mohammadi, were transferred to Evin prison immediately.

Reports indicate that after their transfer to Evin prison, their heads were shaved in the same way as convicted criminals, and they were taken to solitary cells. They were

subjected to several interrogation sessions and held under custody for a long period before being officially charged. Even their families did not have a clear understanding of their situation for a lengthy period.

After Pastor Victor Bet-Tamarz's case was publicized, in a statement, the British Foreign Office expressed its concern over the continuation of Pastor Bet-Tamarz and two Christian converts' imprisonment. The statement expressed deep concerns of the British government over the continuing oppression and harassment of Iranian religious minorities, including Christians, by the Iranian government. It also mentioned that the British government and international community expect the Iranian regime to adhere to international conventions with regards to freedom of religion and freedom of speech of which it is a signatory.

The persecution of Christians in Iran: report launched

APPG on FoRB (10.03.2015) <https://freedomdeclared.org/news/the-persecution-of-christians-in-iran-report-launched/> - Today the Christians in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group and the All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief launched a joint report on [The Persecution of Christians in Iran](#).

In the introduction to the report, the Co-Chairs of the Enquiry, David Burrowes MP and Baroness Berridge of the Vale of Catmose, write:

"This is a subject that weighs heavily on our hearts, particularly following our initial Inquiry, where MPs visited the Middle East in 2012 to meet personally with Iranians who had endured severe maltreatment in their homeland because of their faith.

It was with cautious optimism that we watched Hassan Rouhani become President of Iran in August 2013. We joined with many Iranians in hoping that his influence would soften Iran's harsh policies toward the nation's religious and ethnic minorities.

Sadly, we have been disappointed that his positive promises and moderate language have not translated into any meaningful improvement. The persecution remains as severe today as it was in 2012, when the Christians in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) produced its first report on the Persecution of Christians in Iran."

The report concludes that Iran's Christians and other persecuted religious minorities are faring no better under the supposedly moderate Rouhani than they did under his presidential predecessor.

The report is based on evidence gathered from Iranian witnesses during hearings in Parliament, and written submissions by human rights experts, including Dr Ahmed Shaheed, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It cites President Rouhani's campaign pledges to provide justice for religious minorities, but goes on to conclude on the basis of the evidence examined that respect for freedom of religion or belief has not improved since the 2013 election, and for some Christians it has worsened. Though the inquiry focused on the plight of the Christian community, the report recognises that the persecution of other religious minorities also persists very strongly.

Baroness Berridge, chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief, said: "The panel heard first-hand testimony about the daily pressures and traumas that Iran's Christians face, simply because of their faith. I am particularly concerned about the harsh treatment of those who convert to Christianity from Islam. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights makes clear that every person has the right to freedom of religion or belief, including the right to convert: to change one's faith or beliefs. We hope, pray and labour for a day when Iranians of all faiths and none can live in their homeland without fear of persecution or harassment, with the full spectrum of their rights protected."

The report was launched at a meeting in the Houses of Parliament addressed by Tobias Ellwood MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It has been widely reported in the media, including [this report on Premier](#) after their radio interview with Baroness Berridge.

View the report: http://www.christiansinparliament.org.uk/uploads/APPGs-report-on-Persecution-of-Christians-in-Iran.pdf?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Iranian+President%27s+broken+promises+to+minorities&utm_campaign=Iranian+President%27s+broken+promises+to+minorities

Prison imam files additional complaint against imprisoned pastor

Mohabat news (08.03.2015) - http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9977:prison-imam-files-additional-complaint-against-imprisoned-pastor&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279 On Thursday, March 5th, the Imam of ward 10 of Rajaei-Shahr prison in Karaj ordered Christian prisoners to give their Bibles to him for inspection, but Christian prisoners refused to follow the order.

One of these Christian prisoners told Mohabat News, "The Imam of our ward, called Mr. Mortazavi, arbitrarily issued an order to confiscate our Bibles for inspection. Since we had received our Bibles with legal permission from the Superintendent of the prison, we refused to hand them over to the Imam".

He continued, "The Imam seemed very troubled by our opposition, and falsely filed a complaint against Pastor Farshid Fathi, in which he accused Pastor Fathi of insulting him. This may result in an additional 2 year prison sentence for him."

Each ward in Iranian prisons has an Imam, assigned by the cultural department of the prison, with no legal authority to inspect or punish prisoners.

Pastor Fathi recently dealt with another accusation, for which he was sentenced to an additional year in prison. He appeared in Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court on December 29, 2014, where [he received the additional sentence](#). He was accused of possessing alcoholic beverages in prison. He denied this allegation before the judge.

Pastor Fathi appealed the decision and is [still waiting to hear from the appeals court](#). Now with this new complaint, it is not clear whether he will receive additional time in prison or not.

On August 19, 2014, Pastor Fathi was transferred out of ward 350 of Evin prison and into Rajaei-Shahr prison in Karaj.

He was arrested on December 26, 2010, in a broad campaign by the Iranian government to arrest Christians. He was eventually sentenced to six years in prison. Many more Christians, mostly members of house-churches, were arrested as a result of that campaign in Tehran as well as other cities across the country.

Iranian pastor released from prison but others arrested same day remain

Yet Ayatollah denies aggression against non-Muslims under Islamic Republic

WWM (27.02.2015) - After spending more than one year in prison, for 'collusion against the [Iranian] government' and 'evangelism,' Iranian pastor Rasoul Abdollahi has been released from prison.

Abdollahi, a leader in Iran's house church movement, was arrested Dec. 26 2010 and released last week, Feb. 16. His arrest was the same day as a number of other Christians during a widespread crackdown on church activity.

According to agency Middle East Concern, his release came with strict conditions preventing him from participating in Christian activities; any violation would result in his re-arrest and requirement to fulfil his original sentence.

Initially arrested by Iran's Intelligence Ministry, he was detained and [interrogated for two months](#) before being released on bail and then sentenced to three years in prison in December 2013. Abdollahi, along with Rev. Farshid Fathi and other Christians sentenced at the same time, was then detained in Evin Prison, Tehran.

Farshid Fathi still in prison

Born into a Muslim family in Iran, Fathi became a Christian at age 17. By 2010 he was working full-time as a pastor and leading a network of house churches in Iran. Now 35, he is married with two young children, and has been separated from his family since Christmas 2010.

In 2012 Fathi was sentenced to six years in Evin prison, after 15 months in detention. [World Watch Monitor](#) has reported on how the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office labelled his prison conditions as "harsh".

In April 2014, Fathi suffered a fractured foot and toe after being beaten by security officials during a raid on political prisoners in Evin. In Dec. last year Fathi received an additional sentence of one year in prison.

Iran's Supreme Leader: "Non-Muslims have never been harassed ..."

Meanwhile Iran's Supreme Leader, Seyyed Ali Khamenei, has said that "after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, there is no record of aggression by Muslims against non-Muslims" according to Iranian-funded [Press TV](#).

[Mohabat News](#) an Iranian Christian news agency quoted Khamenei as saying:

"Such treatment of non-Muslims is non-existent in the history of our Islamic regime. Even our hot-headed conservative youth do not allow themselves to attack a non-Muslim...based on Islamic teachings, followers of other religions should be treated with justice and fairness... Muslims in Europe and America face death threats. There is a great propaganda campaign against them, and their places of worship are under constant attack" he said.

Khamenei was speaking at a meeting in the Islamic Parliament with members of Iran's recognised religious minority (RRMs). RRM's include Christian ethnic Armenians, Assyrians and Chaldeans as well as Jews and Zoroastrians. Religious minorities in Iran are classified into two categories: recognised and unrecognised. Unrecognised minorities are individuals who were previously Muslim and chose to leave Islam.

Unrecognised minorities are considered to have committed apostasy (i.e. rejection of Islam by a Muslim) – in Sharia law courts it can be punishable by a death sentence for men and life in prison for women.

Recurring evidence of intolerance

Khamenei's claims of Iran's religious freedom, and tolerance of people of all faiths, come in spite of recurring evidence of intolerance. Large numbers of religious minorities have been imprisoned and executed since the establishment of the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Estimates from evidence provided by the American Center for Law and Justice, Article 18 and Middle East Concern, suggest that in December 2014 there were 92 Christians detained in Iranian prisons, only 13 of whom are serving court-issued sentences.

This treatment has been for both RRM's such as Armenian Christians Sevada Aghasar and Allen Dirigorosiyany, and Assyrian pastor Victor Beth Tarmez, unrecognized religious minorities such as Pastors Rasoul Abdollahi and Farshid Fathi, born into Muslim families and therefore considered apostates for renouncing Islamic beliefs.

Several UN special reports and resolutions have condemned the violation of the rights of religious minorities.

According to the 2015 World Watch List by Open Doors, a charity that supports Christians who face hostilities because of their faith, Iran ranks seventh (up two points from last year) in the top ten countries where Christians are persecuted.

The main driver of persecution in Iran, it says, is 'Islamic extremism'; Christians from an Islamic background are especially targeted. Increasing numbers of Farsi [Persian] speaking churches have been forced to close; some of which have been there for both decades and centuries. This is a development that has not been seen in the history of the church in Iran, stated the World Watch List.

"Expectations were high when President Rouhani took office in 2013. However, his powers are limited and in the short run, no concrete changes are expected for religious minorities" says Open Doors.

Mohabat News reports that even Sunni Muslims cannot enjoy the least amount of freedom. As with Christians and other religious minorities, Sunnis are not allowed to build a mosque of their own in Tehran, the capital.

Christian convert still in prison although his prison term is over

Mohabat News (20.01.2015)

http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9740:christian-convert-still-in-prison-although-his-prison-term-is-over&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279 - Ebrahim Firouzi is a Christian convert who has been arrested several times for his Christian activities. In his [last appearance in court](#) on July 13, 2013, he was sentenced to one year in prison and two years of exile to the remote town of Sarbaz, in Sistan and Baluchestan province for propaganda against the Islamic regime, Evangelism, connection with enemies and "anti-regime networks" abroad, and starting a Christian website.

The sentence was given to him for his earlier accusations. Therefore, taking into account the number of days he has been detained, his prison term should have been over on January 13, 2015. However, he is still being held in prison.

In the meantime, another case has been opened for him in branch 28 of the Revolutionary Courts for "propaganda and action against national security", but so far his judge has refused to deal with this case.

An individual close to Ebrahim Firouzi told Mohabat News, "The judge has issued a 200 million Toman bail (approximately \$73,000 USD) for Ebrahim's release, but when his family went to post the bail, they were rejected".

The individual, whose identity cannot be disclosed for security reasons, added, "Last January Ebrahim Firouzi was taken to a court where he denied all accusations. The judge told him since you denied your accusations, you will need to wait for the prosecutor to appear at the court with you".

It is now a year after that court appearance, he has never been called to court again.

Mr. Firouzi is currently being held in Ward 10 of the Rajaei-Shahr prison in Karaj, together with another Christian prisoner, [Farshid Fathi](#).

In another incident, the authorities at [Rajaei-Shahr prison held a Christmas celebration](#) for the inmates and intentionally prevented Christian prisoners from attending the celebration which was held in the Central Hall of the prison.

It is evident that the pressure on Iranian Christian prisoners continues and is a clear example of the Islamic regime's systematic violation of Human Rights. In this regard, the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom listed Iran as a country where religious freedom is being "seriously" violated and warned that the situation is getting worse in the country.

Christian converts face criminalization of their faith

New Report Finds Severe Restrictions on Religious Practice; Arbitrary Arrests and Detentions Common

International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (16.01.2015)

(http://www.iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/Christians_report_Final_for_web.pdf) - *The report is based on interviews with 31 Christians throughout Iran from April 2011 to July 2012, drawing on extensive first-hand testimony by Iranian Christians,*

lawyers who have represented Christians in Iran, Christian rights advocates, and Iranian Christian journalists, as well as relevant Iranian court verdicts, religious edicts by Shi'a jurists and Iranian laws.

The Iranian authorities should immediately end their systematic persecution and prosecution of Protestants and Christian converts, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran said in a new report released today.

The 73-page comprehensive report, *The Cost of Faith: Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran*, documents a pattern of rights violations that extends to all walks of life for Protestant converts in Iran: they face severe restrictions on religious practice and association, arbitrary arrests and detentions for practicing their faith, and violations of the right to life through state execution for apostasy and extrajudicial killings.

"The egregious violations of Christians' rights, which include not only the inability to freely practice their religion, but also the threat of torture and death at the hands of state officials, go against all international law. The international community must let the Iranian government know this is unacceptable," said Hadi Ghaemi, Executive Director for the Campaign.

The report is based on interviews with 31 Christians throughout Iran from April 2011 to July 2012, drawing on extensive first-hand testimony by Iranian Christians, lawyers who have represented Christians in Iran, Christian rights advocates, and Iranian Christian journalists, as well as relevant Iranian court verdicts, religious edicts by Shi'a jurists and Iranian laws.

The report documents the systematic arbitrary arrest and detention of Christian converts. For example, Farshid Fathi, a 33-year-old Christian leader from Tehran was detained in December 2010 as part of a Christmas crackdown on Christians and subsequently charged with "acting against national security," "contact with enemy foreign countries," and "religious propaganda." The Judiciary has sentenced him to six years in prison which he is currently serving.

Since 2005, authorities have arrested and prosecuted Protestants most often for security crimes against the state. Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, noted in September 2012 that over 300 Christians have been arbitrarily arrested and detained throughout the country since 2010.

Christian detainees are often denied due process and basic rights. They are held in prolonged detention without formal charges, trials are held without access to counsel, or, if there is counsel, without access to court files, and ill treatment is common during detention.

Leading Iranian officials allege, without any substantiation, that Christian converts are part of a foreign inspired "soft war" against the state. Hojjat Al-Islam Abbas Kaebi, a member of the influential Assembly of Experts, in October 2010 claimed, "... the Zionists and Westerners have targeted [through Christian converts] our society's identity and people's religion."

In numerous interviews conducted by the Campaign, Christian converts reported a consistent pattern of abuses by the government. Freedom to practice religion is severely restricted: the government has refused to allow the construction or licensing of any new church since the 1979 Revolution, it restricts church attendance and has closed many churches, it has shut down Iran's main Persian-language bible publisher and restricts the distribution of bibles, and it monitors and harasses church groups.

The Campaign's research reveals that interrogators, prosecutors and courts consistently refer to standard Christian practices, such as membership in a house church, evangelical activities, and participation in a Christian conference, as criminal acts, and security officers routinely confiscate standard Christian items such as bibles, religious literature, and crosses during arrests.

The report also found clear and consistent evidence of the threat to life for Christian converts. One leading Christian pastor, Hossein Soodmand, was executed by the state for apostasy in 1990; other church leaders who were sentenced to death for apostasy, including Christian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, were subsequently acquitted only due to intense international pressure. The Campaign's research revealed numerous reports of security officials threatening Christian detainees with execution on apostasy charges, and numerous cases of suspicious deaths involving Christian leaders whose investigations were so lacking in due diligence that government complicity in the killings or the cover-ups is strongly suggested.

The report also documents the systematic discrimination of Christian Protestants and converts in employment, education, in laws governing marriage and family, and in Iran's penal code.

Under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Iran is obligated to safeguard freedom of religion. While the Iranian government asserts that it respects the rights of its recognized religious minorities, in practice it does not do so.

"From apostasy charges that threaten the lives of converts to the imprisonment of church members involved in proselytizing, authorities have engaged in a pattern of human rights abuses that effectively criminalizes faith and manifestations of it," Ghaemi said.

The Campaign calls on the government of Iran to allow its Christian converts to freely practice their religion, without further threat or intimidation, as is required under international and Iranian domestic law.

Christmas arrests in Iran: 11 still detained

Security forces raided Christmas celebrations in home, arrested three

World Watch Monitor (15.01.2015) - As the US Secretary of State meets his Iranian counterpart in a bid to revive stalled talks over Iran's nuclear programme, human rights experts are keen that issues of freedom of religion are not overlooked.

This week, the UK Foreign Office has said that it's raised its concern with the Iranian government over the arrest and detention - in Iran's notorious Evin prison - of the former leader of the Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Tehran, as well as two others, whose whereabouts remains unknown.

The 60-year-old pastor Victor Beth Tarmez and the two Christian converts who were his guests were arrested when Iranian state security agents raided Tarmez's home during a Christmas celebration he was hosting on the evening of December 26; the gathering was considered to be "unauthorized and illegal."

Mansour Borji, from the Article18 committee of the Hamgaam ('taking steps together' in Dari) Council of Iranian churches told World Watch Monitor that Tarmez' family is

concerned for his health as he's a diabetic. Borji also said details of the actual charge on which Tarmez is detained are still unclear.

Borji told WWM that Tarmez was forced to speak Farsi with his family on a very brief phone call from prison, instead of using their shared native language Assyrian, so that guards could monitor what was said.

The British Foreign Office has written: "The UK government is deeply concerned by the Iranian regime's ongoing persecution of religious minorities - including Christians. ... The UK and the international community expect Iran to live up to the right to freedom of religion and belief as set out in the Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."

During the raid

According to [Mohabat News](#), an Iranian Christian news site, the agents temporarily arrested all 14 in the house at the time. Then they filmed all the detainees, forcing them to "introduce themselves to the camera and say why they were there and why they thought they were being arrested" and then asked them to "fill out an eight-page form printed on papers with the logo of the Ministry of Intelligence". Among those arrested were Christian converts with a Zoroastrian [ancient Iranian religion] background, who refused to fill out the forms arguing that this was a written interrogation and could result in a criminal record for them. They said they had not broken any law and should not be subject to interrogation."

The agents also confiscated the pastor's belongings including his computer and Bibles. They also searched the guests, seizing their identification cards and mobile phones.

Pastor Tarmez repeatedly intimidated since 2009

Tarmez is an Assyrian pastor officially recognized by the Iranian government; until 2009, he also worked as General Superintendent in Shahr-Ara Assyrian Pentecostal Church.

He had been holding Farsi-speaking services for years at Shahr-Ara. Then, [as reported on this website](#), in March 2009, the Assyrian Member of the Iranian Parliament Yonathan Betkolia announced that, by order of the Islamic Revolutionary Court, the church would be closed because it offered a Farsi-language service attended by converts from Islam. While the church was temporarily closed after Tarmez refused to stop Farsi-language services, it was later re-opened (after he had been demoted from leadership) with a new church leader, and services continued in Assyrian only.

The number of Assyrian Christians in the country is estimated at between 10,000 and 20,000.

Since 2009 Tarmez has continued his religious activities.

Borji told WWM that 2009 was the start of government pressure against churches which hold Farsi-language services. (Most recently, [we reported on the closure in May 2013 of the Assemblies of God](#) church in Tehran).

Borji explained to WWM: "Over the past five years, we have witnessed arrests of several Christians and Christian converts during Christmas holidays: the government is very sensitive about these days... Also in the last 5 years, seven churches that offered worship services in Farsi language were closed down or forced to cease their Farsi services.

More Christmas arrests of Iranian Christians

Borji also confirmed to WWM that eight other Christians were arrested on Christmas Day at a house church in Tehran province and have since been transferred to an unknown location.

They are Mehdi Kian, Ali Sadraddin, Mohammad Kazemi, Azin Faroudi, Mohammad Hossein Moridian, Maryam Narimani, Alireza Nasiri and Brother Matin.

Another organisation, Middle East Concern, reported that over the Christmas period a total of 24 arrests of Christians were recorded, although it added that, separately, five other Christians have recently been released from prison, some on bail and with conditions. One, Amin Khaki, had been held since March 2014.

Iran No. 7 on World Watch List

Iran ranks No. 7 on the 2015 World Watch List, two positions higher than the previous year.

The list ranks the 50 countries where living as a Christian is most difficult, and is created annually by Open Doors International, a worldwide ministry to Christians who live under pressure because of their faith

Open Doors said the ranking changed because of an increased deteriorating situation for Christians in Iran. It says "According to the Iranian state, only Armenians and Assyrians can be Christian. Ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim, and, therefore, ethnic Persian Christians are considered apostates. This makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially when it occurs in Persian (Farsi) languages - from evangelism to Bible training, to publishing Scripture and Christian books, or preaching in Farsi".

Why are burial rights being denied to a Baha'i in Iran?

World Religion News (11.01.2015) - What should have been a period of mourning for most people has turned into a political and religious scandal in Iran. A man named Shamel Bina, a Baha'i, died in late October, but has been denied burial rights in Iran for two months, leaving his family in mourning and without the ability to put their loved one to rest. This complicated religious and political move is garnering attention around the globe, as Bina's family simply wants to bury their relative.

The Baha'i are a group of individuals that conform to a monotheistic faith that emphasizes the unity of humanity. They have fallen under severe persecution in nations like Iran because the faith does not conform to the national faith of Islam. The Baha'i have had many different run-ins with the Iranian government, with this as only the latest disrespect levied against the faith. With Shamel Bina's body lying in the morgue for the foreseeable future, there are many people who are discouraged that there will be any allowances made for his burial rites in this case.

As most people are aware, the official religion of Iran is Islam. While they have strict laws that oversee this religion, they are considered by many to be blind to the plight of other religions. The Baha'i are one of these groups, and while there is some evidence to support that Iran is purposely seeing to their disadvantage, it definitely seems as though they are not doing anything to ease their burdens.

In fact, there are several cases that are similar to Bina's, where the government is inflicting hardships on this particular group. For the most part, they are attempting to make the Baha'i conform to the burial rites of Islam. Many people have been refused burial in Iran until their family is willing to do so without a casket. In some cases, they are simply not allowed to be buried in specific towns across the nation.

This latest blow to the Baha'i faith has prompted a variety of people to plead with the government to ease the legal restrictions that prevent them from burying their dead relatives. Old and young have come together to ask for the increasingly institutionalized discrimination to end. Even still, Shamel Bina's body goes unburied while the state still denies him the burial rites that his religion sees as necessary, with no word from the government as to whether this situation can be ameliorated.

Former Assyrian Church leader and two Christian converts arrested

International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (07.01.2015) - Iranian security agents arrested an Assyrian pastor and two Christian converts who were his guests at his Tehran residence on December 26, 2014, according to Mansour Borji, Spokesperson for the Alliance of Iranian Churches.

Borji told the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran that the full reasons for the arrest of Pastor Victor Beth Tarmez, a former leader of the Tehran Pentecostal Assyrian Church, and his guests remain unknown, but that at the time of the raid on his home, agents stated that they were arresting the individuals because they "participated in an illegal gathering." The "illegal gathering" was a Christmas party Tarmez was holding at his home and his guests were Zoroastrian, Muslim, and Christian citizens.

"There was a Christmas party at Pastor Victor's home. He and his wife and son and 14 guests were there. When agents entered the home, first they searched all the personal belongings of the guests, then they videotaped their faces, and then they searched the premises. Eventually, they arrested Pastor Tarmez along with two Christian converts and confiscated some property from the home," Borji told the Campaign.

"During a short phone call to his family on December 29, Pastor Victor informed them that he is held at Evin Prison. We have no information about the status of the two Christian converts arrested on the same day. All we know is that they have not been released yet," added Mansour Borji.

Asked whether Pastor Victor had been threatened or arrested before, Borji said "In 2009, Intelligence Ministry agents asked Pastor Victor to cancel his Farsi-language classes at the Church. He resisted and continued his classes. In the end, agents put pressure on the Church and the Church dismissed him from his position. But Pastor Beth Tarmez continued his religious activities."

"Over the past five years, we have witnessed arrests of several Christians and Christian converts during Christmas holidays. The government is very sensitive about these days and even tells Farsi-language churches in advance that they can only have one gathering for Christmas, because they are worried that because of the Farsi language [used in the sermons], regular people would also come to church and listen to what is being said," concluded Mansour Borji.

Despite official assertions that Christians enjoy full rights as citizens of Iran, the Christian community—particularly Evangelicals and Protestant communities that are seen as

encouraging conversion to Christianity, suffers severe and widespread discrimination and persecution in Iran, as documented in the Campaign's report, *The Cost of Faith: Persecution of Christian Protestants and Converts in Iran*, and noted in the reports of the UN Secretary-General and the UN Special Rapporteur for human rights in Iran.
