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## **More Christians receive excessive sentences**

CSW (12.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2uhtl0k> - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, Mohammadreza Omid, Yasser Mossayebzadeh and Saheb Fadaie have been sentenced to ten years in prison each for "acting against national security". The verdict, which was dated 24 June, was received on 6 July.

The pastor and Mr Omid were also given additional two years sentences to be served in an area the south of the country, which has an exceedingly hot and harsh environment. They have 20 days to appeal the sentence.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply disappointed by these excessive sentences, which are based on spurious charges and are clearly part of an intensified campaign of judicial harassment aimed at intimidating members of minority faiths."

On 14 June, the men were summoned to the 26<sup>th</sup> Chamber of the Revolutionary Tribunal, where the presiding judge, Judge Ahmadzadeh, informed them they would receive a verdict within 20 days, and accused their church of receiving £500,000 per year from the British government. During the hearing, Judge Abolghasem Salavati, who heads the 15<sup>th</sup> Branch of the Revolutionary Court and is notorious for issuing harsh sentences, entered the court room and announced that "Christians make foolish claims."

The four men were arrested on 13 May, during a series of raids by security service (VEVAK) agents on Christian homes in Rasht. A ruling on their case was expected prior to Iranian New Year on 21 March; however, a decision to refer the case to judicial authorities in Tehran delayed the sentencing. A ruling is still overdue for a decision on an appeal by Mr Omid, Mr Mossayebzadeh and Mr Fadaie against a sentence of eighty lashes each for drinking wine during a Communion service.

The 6 July verdict is the latest in a series of excessive sentences passed by Judge Ahmadzadeh against Iranian Christians based on unfounded charges.

On 3 July, Judge Ahmadzadeh sentenced Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz, Mr Hadi Asgari and Mr Kaviyan Fallah-Mohammadi to ten years in prison each, while Amin Afshar-Naderi was given a 15-year sentence, and all were banned from travelling for two years.

According to Iranian religious freedom organisation Article18, Mr Afshar-Naderi and Mr and Mr Fallah-Mohammadi were among several Christians arrested on 26th December 2014 at a Christmas celebration at the pastor's home in Tehran. They were both charged with "acting against national security by organising and conducting house-churches", and Mr Afshar-Naderi received was also charged with "insulting the sacred" (blasphemy).

In yet another case, during a hearing held on 23 May, Judge Ahmadzadeh imposed 10 year sentences on Iranian national Nasser Navard Goltape, and Yusif Farhadov, Eldar Gurbanov and Bahram Nasibov from the Republic of Azerbaijan. They had been arrested on 24 June 2016, and kept in solitary confinement in Tehran's Evin prison for two months, where they were subjected to harsh interrogations before being charged.

Mervyn Thomas added, "We reiterate that the national security charges levelled in all of these cases amount to the criminalisation of the Christian community for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief, and that this is occurring despite the fact that the Iranian constitution recognises Christianity. We urge members of the international community to extend the sanctions still in place against Iranian individuals to include members of the judiciary who are implicated in ongoing and severe harassment and persecution of religious minority communities."

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## **Heavy prison terms for a "priest" and another converted Christian" in Iran**

***Heavy sentences for Christians is being haded out by Judge Ahmadzadeh the head of 26th Branch of Islamic Revolutionary Court.***

Mohabat News (08.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2udF68m> - As reported by the Christian News Agency in Iran, "Mohabat News", "Victor Bat Tomerz", the former priest of the Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Tehran, and a converted Christian "Kavian Falah Mohammad" were sentenced to prison terms by Judge Ahmadzadeh of the 26th branch of Islamic Court on 11th of June 2017.

According to the sentences pronounced by this court, "priest Victor" and "Kavian Falah Mohammadi" were accused of violating the national security of the country by hosting "House Churches" and were punished with 10 years prison terms.

According to this sentence, after the prison term, they are banned from leaving the country for two years.

Priest Victor was one of the official Assyrian clerics and had served Pentecostal churches for more than 3 decades. He was also a famous pastor among the Persian-speaking Christians, while he was dismissed from his service with the interference of few government-related agents like "Yonatan Bat Celia", the parliamentary representative of the Assyrian minority in Islamic parliament, and under the pressure from security and information apparatus on 31st of March 2009. Accordingly, the Persian church services provided to the Persian-speaking converted Christians were also canceled.

Reverend Victor along with his wife and their child and 12 other converted Christians were identified and arrested on 26th of December 2014 in their house by the police while they were celebrating Christmas.

The information agents released all the individuals attending this celebration after their written interrogation and signing a promissory covenant. Apart from Reverend Victor, Amin Afshar Naderi and Kavian Falah Mohammadi were also among the arrested Christians who were sent to Evin prison.

Reverend Victor was temporarily released after 65 days imprisonment with heavy bail on 1st of March 2015. Despite his old age, he was mostly kept in solitary confinement which led to his severe health issues.

Kavian Falah Mohammadi was also temporarily released one week later with a bail worth 100 million Tomans ( \$30,000). On the other hand, the status of Shamiran Isavi, Reverend Victor's wife, and his son Bat Ramyyi Tamraz, is still uncertain and their trial has not yet been.

The 26th branch of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran has pronounced heavy charges and sentences for the converts in the past few days.

Amin Afshar Naderi and Hadi Askari, two Converted Christians were also sentenced to 25 years prison terms in the same judiciary branch not to mention that three Christians from Azerbaijan and an Iranian convert were sentenced to 40 years prison terms altogether on 12th June 2017.

Records has shown that heavy charges and keeping the Christian cases sealed from the public along with heavy bails, especial for pastors, has become a very beneficial income for the judiciary, which means they decide heavy bail- in form of cash or noncash payments- and keep pending their trials while pressurizing them in many different ways to force them to leave the country and thus seizing their properties.

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## **Four Christians receive 10 year sentences**

CSW (04.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2tFUmdk> - A judge in Iran has sentenced four Christians to 10 years imprisonment each for engaging in missionary activities and "conducting activities against national security."

Judge Ahmedzadeh handed down the sentences in the case involving Iranian national Nasser Navard Goltape, and Yusif Farhadov, Eldar Gurbanov and Bahram Nasibov from the Republic of Azerbaijan during a hearing held on 23 May 2017. However, the judgement was not communicated to them until 12 June. Although the men are appealing the sentences, local sources are pessimistic about the outcome, despite the lack of evidence against them, as the authorities appear determined to use the case to make a punitive statement.

The four men were arrested on 24 June 2016, after traveling to Tehran on an informal visit to their Christian friends. They were confined in Evin Prison, where they initially spent around two months in solitary confinement enduring regular interrogation, before being moved to Ward 350. They were released on bail on 29 October 2016, and the three Azeris were allowed to return to their country on 7 November 2016, having paid the full bail

amount. The Azeri Christians may forfeit bail by not returning to Iran; however, Mr Navard Goltape does not have this option.

Mansour Borji, advocacy director of Article 18, an organisation that defends persecuted Christians in Iran, expressed deep concern at the sentences, pointing out that: "this recent verdict by Iran's revolutionary court is particularly alarming, as many other Iranian Christians are still awaiting trial for exercising their right to worship as Christians in privacy of their homes."

Previously, the maximum sentence issued in such cases was five years, and in cases where defendants received two five year sentences, these were reduced to five years on appeal. According to records compiled by Article 18, in the last three months Judge Ahmadzadeh has sentenced at least 16 Christians to between five and 10 years imprisonment.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: "The charges and sentences against these four men are unwarranted and unjustifiable, given the paucity of the evidence against them. We are deeply concerned for Mr Navard Goltape in particular, who is likely to bear the brunt of a sentence that was clearly issued on a punitive rather than on a legal basis. We reiterate that the constant harassment of members of the Christian community ought not to be occurring in a country where the constitution not only recognises Christianity, but also states that no-one should be molested or taken to task simply for holding a religious belief. As the three men launch their appeal, we urge the Iranian authorities to ensure due process is observed. We also call on the Iranian authorities to take steps to ensure that the nation's practices, legal procedures and provisions come into alignment with its international commitment to ensure freedom of religion or belief for all of its religious communities."

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## **Iranian Islamic Government funds publication of anti-Christian books**

***Continuing the wave of negative publicity against Christians, a security firm published a book against Christianity in Iran. This book claimed that Christians seek to deceive people with a Messiah impression (reappearance of Christ).***

Mohabat News (09.06.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2ruM42R> - Following the anti-Christian policies in the publication zone, advertising agencies of security institutions in the Islamic Republic published a book titled "Christian Zionism in the geography of Christianity."

Lines of this book denote starting an extensive effort by Christians to attract and lure people. They intend to inculcate people into trusting apocalypse signs and events and believing in the Second Advent (parousia) and reappearance of Christ. This anti-Christian book has suggested that the most dangerous trends in Christianity especially in the Northern hemisphere is Christian Zionism. Christian Zionism involves "new gospel" approaches and has been constituted by a combination of Christianity and Judaism that has played a very prominent role in the formation of the Zionist regime.

Security watch institute in collaboration with "Gahan" has published "Christian Zionism in the Geography of Christianity." The task of this organization is monitoring websites, news

agencies, and satellite channels that oppose or are critical of the Islamic Republic, especially in regards to theoretical and ideological topics. One of the websites monitored by this organization is an Iranian-Christian news agency, "Mohabbat News." The security watch institute sector on Christianity, mainly analyses, monitors, and watches the "Mohabbat News" website bulletin in an attempt to distort and destroy the website.

By spending large amount of money on creating propaganda through advertising and book publication centers, websites, and affiliated press and news agencies, the Islamic Republic intends to justify backward ideologies, unrighteousness, and anti-Christianity trends.

This website and similar websites are very vital and valuable for judiciary and revolutionary guard interrogators, as they refer to these website texts for making cases against Christian converts, political activists, prisoners of conscience and religious dissidents. This book claims that the "Christian Zionism movement with possession of hundreds of media, academia and financial supports succeeded to gain millions of followers in western countries. They also try to make Islamic countries, especially our Islamic homeland their target." Publishing anti-Christian related books date back to the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

For example, Young Researchers' Center affiliated with the Islamic Research Institute for Culture and Thoughts to publish "Violence in the Shelter of Christianity," which inserts false content such as: Christians by wrong referencing to the Holy Bible attribute their sensual and bestiality acts to Christianity.

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## **Anti-Christianity discussion workshops in Mashhad**

***A workshop reviewing the Bible was held in Mashhad for students of Islamic seminaries to familiarize them with the methods of dealing with the spread of Christianity.***

Mohabbat News (21.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2tl2DQ3> - A group of Islamic seminaries students in Mashhad organized a discussion workshop on Christianity to realize different ways of dealing with the conversion of people to Christianity.

Mashhad, often referred to as "Holy Mashhad," is home to one of the holiest pilgrim sites for Shia Muslims.

Mashhad is a city in northeast Iran, known as a place of religious pilgrimage. It's centered on the vast Holy Shrine of Imam Reza, with golden domes and minarets that are floodlit at night.

In the course of this workshop Reza Mousavi, a turbaned cleric expert on religions and sects and the spread of Evangelist and Christian propaganda in Iran, scrutinized methods in which Christians attract young people to Christianity.

It has been said in this workshop that Christian missionaries use virtual networks including Instagram and Telegram. It has also been suggested that Islamic seminaries should focus on using existing aptitudes in cyberspace.

Mousavi is in charge of the Christian studies division at the strategic institute of "Hagh Pazhoohi." He held this anti-Christianity course in three sessions and during this course he reviewed and criticized the bible as well as the teachings of Christianity.

The Islamic Republic uses different methods to attempt to prevent the spread of Christianity among youth. The Islamic government tries to avert the spread of Christianity and prevent the conversion of a wave of citizens', especially young people, to Christianity in Iran by spending millions of dollars to filter out and jam satellite signals on Christian-related websites and channels.

According to the "Fergheh News" website (a government supported website), "existing divergences, disagreement and challenges about the Bible and teachings of Christianity among Christians especially in modern times were among subjects that were discussed in these sessions and supporting evidences from Christian thinkers about this topic were presented."

This report alleged that among underlying issues of this workshop was the necessity of a comparative study between Islamic and Christian teachings to demonstrate the superiority of Islam.

In addition to disbursements by Islamic religious institutions on producing anti-Christian radio and television programs and publishing dozens of anti-Christian books with inappropriate and unrealistic content to block the path of gospel of the Lord, millions of dollars from state budget are spent on Islamic institutions and organizations to re-attract young people who are bored with Islam.

Mashhad is one of the cities in which high-ranking authorities often expressed their concern for the spread of Christianity.

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## Releases of some Baha'i prisoners of conscience

Sen's Daily (19.05.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2rf0ZBK> - **Said Azimi**, a Baha'i who was arrested in his home by agents from the Ministry of Intelligence on October 25, 2016, was released on bail at mid-May after more than 200 days in detention without trial.

**Mohsen Mehrgani**, who was arrested along with Manouchehr Rahmani in their home in Isfahan on January 24, has also been released, on bail, set at 500 million tumans. This would be over 130,000 euros if the report is correct, or one tenth of that if the amount is actually in rials, Iran's official currency. He has been held for over three months, and because of his diabetes and the lack of insulin in prison, his health has suffered. Manouchehr Rahmani is still being detained.

**Farhad Eqbali**, a Baha'i prisoner of conscience from Gorgan, was released from Raja'i Shahr prison near Tehran where he has been serving a five-year sentence.

Mr. Eqbali was fired from his work in the poultry sector in July 2004, because of pressure on his employer from the Ministry of Intelligence. Under Iran's apartheid system, Baha'is are barred from working in most food-related sectors because they are regarded as "unclean." He went on to study radiology at Shiraz University, but was expelled in his second year of study because of his Baha'i beliefs. In November, 2012, he was one of about twenty Baha'is, and some Muslims accused of associating with Baha'is, who were arrested in Gorgan. He was quickly released on bail because of his heart condition. He was tried with four other Baha'is on charges of propaganda against the regime, participation in Baha'i activities and cooperation with foreign governments. His five-year sentence was confirmed by the court of review on August 27, 2014, and he began to serve it in Gorgan on the same day. Soon afterwards, he was transferred to Evin prison, in Tehran, and was moved to Raja'i Shahr prison in October, 2014.

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## Persecution of Baha'is in March

By Willy Fautré

HRWF (27.03.2017) – **Throughout the whole month of March, Baha'is were arrested, jailed, sentenced to prison terms and expelled from university; homes were raided and businesses were sealed, just because they were Baha'is.**

### **Navid Moallem arrested in Minudasht**

Based on a [Bahai News report](#), **Navid Moallem**, a Baha'i resident of Minudasht in Golestan Province, was arrested on March 13, in front of his place of business, and transferred to prison.

Mr. Moallem and his wife, Kamelia Bidelian [also reported as Bideli], had previously been sentenced to one year and six-months imprisonment as part of a case named "Baha'is Arrested in Golestan Province."

During the original court hearing, 22 Baha'is of Golestan Province who were arrested on October 17, 2012 were sentenced to a total of 193 years of imprisonment. Following their hearings at the court of appeals, it was announced that

**Farah Tebyanian, Puna Sana'I, Mona Amri Hesari, Behnam Hassani, Parisa Shahidi, Mojdeh Zouhori, Parivash Shoja`i, Tina Mohabati and Hana Aqiqiyan**, all from Gorgan;

**Shohreh Samimi** from Minudasht;

**Bita Hedayati, Vesaq Sana'i and Hana Kushkabaghi** from Gonbad-e Qabus

had their prison sentences reduced from 9 years to one year and nine months.

However, the one year and nine month prison sentence of **Tina Mohabati** was later overturned, and she was sentenced to pay a three million tuman (approx US\$925) fine.

**Rufeya Pakzadan, Soudabeh Mehdinezhad, Mitra Nouri, Shiva Rouhani, Houshmand Dehqan, Mariyam Dehqan and Nazi Tahqiqi**, all from Gorgan,

**Kamelia Bideli and Navid Moalem** from Minudasht, had their sentences reduced from 6 years to 18 months.

The review court did not announce its decision on the cases of **Shahnam Jadhbani** from Minudasht and **Shayda Qodousi** from Gorgan, who were sentenced to 11 years in prison.

The Baha'is were charged with collaborating with hostile governments, effective activities to promote the goals of a sect and of anti-Islamic and anti-Shia hostile governments, and with making propaganda in favour of the Baha'i Faith and against the regime of the Islamic Republic, by participating in the 'Ruhi program' (Baha'i catechism) in Golestan Province. The sentencing by the court of appeals of **Shahnam Jazbani** (from Minudasht) and **Shayda Ghoddousi** (from Gorgan), who were each sentenced to 11 years of imprisonment, has yet not been communicated to them. (Source: [Iran Press Watch](#), March 23, 2017)

### **Liza Tebyanian arrested in Karaj**

According to a [Bahai News report](#), **Liza Tebyanian Enayati**, a Baha'i resident of Karaj in Alborz Province, was arrested by security officers on Wednesday, March 14, 2017.

Bahai News reports that six security officers entered her home with a warrant, and after searching it and confiscating her personal property, including religious and non-religious books; laptops and so forth, arrested her. Her family still does not have any information about her whereabouts.

Previously, the business of her husband, Mansour Enayati, was sealed by government agents from the Office of Public Places because he is an adherent of the Baha'i religion. In September, 2016, his daughter and her husband, Ahdiyyeh Enayati and Sahba Maslahi, were arrested in Shiraz.

She was freed on bail on March 26 after being held in Raja'i Shahr prison. (Iran Press Watch, 15 March 2017 – Sen's Daily, 26 March 2017)

### **Two Baha'i businesses shut by authorities in Karaj**

On March 9, police and agents from the Ministry of Intelligence and the Ministry of Penal Affairs, along with a judge, went to one business in Karaj that is run by two Baha'is, Farid and Farnush Pasha'i in the Gohardasht neighbourhood of Karaj, where they sealed the premises.

The pretext was 'sexual contraband.' Although the owners presented invoices of their purchases to show that the articles were not contraband, the officers were uninterested, and returned on March 10 to confiscate all the business stock. [Under Iran's economic apartheid system, Baha'is are not permitted to provide many items of food, drink and personal services to Muslims, since Baha'is are 'unclean.' The rules are unwritten, or what is written is circulated confidentially, making it difficult for Baha'is to know what they may and may not sell. A broad list of [market sectors closed to Baha'is](#) was published on the blog of Sen's Daily (See <http://bit.ly/2nh4of8>) in 2015, but the rules are constantly changing).

Government officers also went to a newly-opened business run by another Bahai, Arash Kazemi in the "Golshahr Metri 45" neighbourhood of Karaj. They shuttered the premises. (Source: [Bahai News](#), March 10, 2017)

### **One arrest in Rey: Mrs. Sima Keyani**

**Sima Keyani**, a Baha'i living in [Rey](#) (on the outskirts of Tehran), was arrested at her home by security forces on the morning of March 8. Her home was also searched, and a pickup truck was used to take away her religious books, along with religious images and family photographs. Her place of detention is not yet known, but it is likely she would be taken to Evin prison. (Source: [Bahai News](#), March 8, 2017)

### **Haleh Gholami free on bail**

**Haleh Gholami**, a Baha'i from Tehran who has been detained in Evin Prison since January 27, was freed on bail on March 6. She was arrested because of her activism in child protection matters, such as the care of orphans, and for participating in a charity working to suppress child labour. At the time of her arrest her home was searched by security agents who confiscated her mobile phones and tablets. (Source: [Bahai News](#), March 7, 2017)



### **Two more Baha'i students expelled from universities**

In separate reports dated [March 4](#) and [March 6](#), Bahai News reports on the expulsion of Mahsa Sha`erzadeh and Puya Azami Aqjeh.

Ms. Mahsa Sha`erzadeh, a Bahai living in Ramhormoz, in Khuzestan, was expelled from the campus of Payam-e Nour University in Rahhormoz because of her Baha'i beliefs. She was taking a bachelor's course in Applied Chemistry, and had passed her final exams and gained 70 credits. She was summoned by the Ministry of Intelligence in the city and pressured to officially withdraw from her course. She refused, but was expelled on March 1, 2017, and was given no documentation.

Mr. Puya Azami Aqjeh, a Baha'i from Tehran, was expelled from the Rudehen campus of the Free Islamic University. He was in the first semester of a bachelor's degree in Civil Engineering. In January 2016, he found himself barred from the final examination for the semester, and was told that he had no right to university education because he was a Baha'i. He is the sixth Baha'i student expelled from this University in recent months. (Source: Bahai News, 4 and 6 March 2017)

### **Baha'i home raided in Shiraz**

At 8 a.m. on Friday, March 3, a number of agents from the Revolutionary Guards raided the home of Mrs. Anusha Afshar-Reza'i in Shiraz. They forced an entrance and searched her home, seizing religious books, personal and religious photographs, a laptop, mobile telephones and memory sticks. (Source: [Bahai News](#), March 3, 2017)

### **Contradictory statements by Mazandaran Attorney General on the closure of 94 Baha'i businesses**

According to [HRANA](#), the news arm of Human Rights Activists in Iran, over 100 days have passed since the simultaneous closing of 94 business units belonging to Baha'is in Mazandaran. During this time, the Attorney General of Mazandaran, Assadollah Jafari, has issued contradictory statements regarding his role in the closure and sealing of the businesses of Baha'is.

Under Article 32 of the Code of Criminal Law, management and oversight of the judiciary is up to the prosecutor. Also, according to Clause 1 of Article 28 of the Law on trade, the closure of any trade unit must be done with the knowledge of trade unions (trade guilds), and the Office of Private Property is the executive liaison to the unions. The unions said that they had no knowledge of the reason for the sealing of the Baha'i Businesses in Mazandaran and they had no role in these closures. (Source: [Iran Press Watch](#), March 3, 2017)

### **Keyvan Pakzadan sentenced to 5 years in prison**

**Keyvan Pakzadan**, a Baha'i from Tehran, who was arrested as he was leaving his sister's home on June 1, 2016, has been sentenced to 5 years in prison by Judge Moqayesseh. Judge Moqayesseh was also responsible for the sentencing of the seven 'Yaran' (national facilitators for the Baha'is in Iran) and more recently the artist Shahriar Cyrus, who was also given five years in prison.

At the time of his arrest, agents not only searched his home and workplace and seized some of his personal effects, they also searched through his sister and brother-in-law's effects and seized a laptop, flash drives, contracts, a Will, receipts, signed cheques and working notes. He was held for 34 days before being released on bail. Some of his possessions and those of his sister were also returned to them. He was tried on January

22, and the sentence was handed down on February 27, on the charge of "membership of Baha'i organisations." (Source: [Bahai News](#), March 1, 2017)

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## **Iranian Christian Mother and Son Arrested in Iran**

***Two Christian converts, a mother and her son, were arrested by plain-clothed security authorities and taken to an unknown location.***

Mohabat News (05.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2n54HMT> - A Christian mother and her son were arrested on February 20, 2017 in Urmia by the Revolutionary Guards Intelligence officers. They were both immediately transferred to an unknown location.

The two arrested were identified as "Anousheh Reza-bakhsh" (Veronika) and her son Soheil Zagarzadeh Sani (Augustine). They were both arrested in their home in Urmia, in the Western Azerbaijan province in northwestern Iran.

There has been no further update on their whereabouts and well-being since the day of their arrest.

Soheil Zargarzadeh Sani is a psychology university student in his senior year. Eye-witnesses told Mohabat News that a group of intelligence officers raided their home and confiscated their books, including their Bibles and some books on Christian theology.

The mother and son who were arrested were converts to the Catholic church and had never been arrested before for their faith or any other reason.

It is believed that those arrested in Urmia for faith related charges are normally detained in the Revolutionary Guards Intelligence building.

The last reported Christian arrest in Urmia dates back to September 2008, when the Revolutionary Guards raided the residence of Schroeder Yadegar, one of the ministers at the official Assyrian Evangelical Church in Urmia. The Revolutionary Guards thoroughly searched his house and detained him without any explanation as to why he was being arrested. Along with him, another believer who was visiting him from Tehran, was arrested as well.

They were both charged with spying for, and contact with foreign countries. Just two days after their arrest, another Iranian Christian convert named Sobhan was arrested as well for his conversion from Islam to Christianity.

One of the campaign promises of the supposedly more moderate president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, was equal rights for religious and ethnic minorities. However, since he took power, reports indicate a more aggressive crackdown on religious and ethnic minorities has occurred.

Another Iranian official, Alavi Boroujerdi, a prominent Islamic cleric in Iran, emphasized in one of his recent remarks that people of all faith should co-exist peacefully. He claimed religious minorities have absolute freedom in Iran.

These seemingly positive remarks do not seem to have any effect on the way Iranian religious minorities, including Christians, are treated.

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## Iranian Christian prisoners to go on hunger strike

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (08.02.2017) - Two Christian prisoners, Hadi Asgari and Amin Afshar Naderi, who have spent the last six months in jail in uncertainty, have threatened to go on a hunger strike. Hadi Asgari has been suffering from kidney infection in prison and as of now has not received any proper medical attention.

Hadi Asgari and Amin Afshar Naderi have been held in prison for the last six months in Ward 4 of the Evin prison. They seek fair treatment of their case and adequate medical care in prison, and as such have decided to go on hunger strike should the authorities keep them in uncertainty for a longer period.

Reports indicate that these Christian men have not been interrogated nor has their lawyer been able to review their case. All the requests made by their families to obtain information about their situation have been turned down as well.

It is thought that this long waiting period is also used to fabricate false evidence against such prisoners to be used in court.

They could spend months or even years in solitary confinement without going through the common judicial process. This long period of waiting in prison often breaks the prisoners emotionally and causes lasting mental and physical damage.

Hadi Asgari and Amin Afshar Naderi were arrested on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2016, together with other Christians - Amir Saman Dashti, Ramil Bet-Tamraz, and Mohammad Dehnavi - at a family party in a garden in Firouzkouh county, north of Tehran. They were not only charged with having a non-Islamic party but also with possession of Bibles and Christian material, which is a crime in the country. Even though they were not having a worship session during their gathering, the mere possession of Christian material amongst them is considered an offence.

Eye witnesses reported that Mr. Afshar Naderi protested against the police's harsh treatment of the guests, but in response police beat him and began searching the premises. They found three Bibles there and added them to the list of confiscated items.

Ramil Bet-Tamraz, is the son of Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz, former leader of the Shahr-Ara Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Tehran. Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz had been arrested himself in December, 2014 while celebrating Christmas with friends and family. In that incident, Amin Afshar Naderi was released on bail on 10<sup>th</sup> February after spending thirty-six days in jail, during which he was frequently interrogated. He spent one month of his arrest in solitary confinement.

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## Studying at the Bahai secret university

***The largest non-Muslim minority in Iran, the Bahais, are persecuted in many ways - one being that they are forbidden from attending university. Some study in secret, but for those who want to do a postgraduate degree the only solution is to leave their country and study abroad.***

By Lipika Pelham

BBC News (18.01.201) - <http://bbc.in/2jBWRbg> - "I remember my father showing me the scars he had on his head from when he used to be beaten up by the children of his town on his way to school," says Shirin. "So, of course, I didn't tell my father that I was experiencing the same when I was growing up in Iran in the 1980s. I knew he prayed and hoped that the world would get better."

In fact, persecution of the Bahais only increased following the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

And when Shirin's son, Khosru, started going to school, she had to hide more bad news from her father.

"I did not tell him that the children of the children of the children who left him scarred, are now calling my son untouchable," she says.

When, in the eighth grade, Khosru told the other children he was Bahai they dropped him like a stone.

"The kids wouldn't touch me," he says, "and if I were to touch them, they'd go and take a shower."

Since the creation of the Bahai faith in the mid-19th Century, the Iranian Shia establishment has called them "a deviant sect", principally because they reject the Muslim belief that Mohammed was the last prophet.

On official websites they are described as apostates, and as "unclean".

But it is when a student has finished school that the problems really begin.

As a Bahai, Shirin was told she could not enter university. Her only option was to secretly attend the Bahais' own clandestine university - the Bahai Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), set up in the mid-1980s by Bahai teachers and students who had been thrown out of Iranian universities after the revolution.

Shirin enrolled in 1994. At that time, only two BA courses were available -in Science or Religious Studies - so she decided to study comparative religion.

Lectures took place in improvised classrooms in private homes all around Tehran. It took six years to complete her course, and it was then that she hit an impenetrable wall. There was no scope to do an MA or a PhD, and there was no scope for employment where her skills could be used.

Soon afterwards, a wave of crackdowns on the Bahai intelligentsia began, with raids on clandestine classrooms and the arrest of many BIHE teachers. Shirin saw her world was closing in on her. So when she heard about a domestic worker's visa scheme in the UK, she jumped at it.

"I applied straight away without wasting time, it didn't matter what the visa was called. I had to leave," she says.

Shirin arrived in the UK in 2003 and combined her domestic work with an evening job at an Italian restaurant in Scarborough. But she never forgot what she came to do, what she must achieve.

On a dark and smoggy English morning, she boldly walked through the doors of Birmingham University, and announced that she had a degree in religion from an underground university in Tehran.

To her great surprise, a week later, she was summoned back and was offered a place.

"It was more than a miracle - it was beyond expectation, beyond my wildest dream," she says. "Till today, I feel it was the best reward I received for never compromising my faith."

Shirin finished her degree in 2006 and left the UK to join her brother in the US, where many of her family, friends and co-religionists have, over the years, found sanctuary from persecution.

But soon another crackdown against the Bahais began, at home in Iran.

In 2008, seven members of the Bahai administrative body, Yaran, were arrested and charged with among other things, spying for Israel. After a trial in a Revolutionary Court in 2010, they were sentenced to up to 20 years in prison.

At this time another young Bahai woman, Mona, was applying to university in Tehran.

"I took an entrance exam at the University of Tehran - they were supposed to send a card saying how and where you should register if you were accepted, and you must write your religion on the card," she says.

"I wrote that I was not Muslim. There was an option that said 'other', and I ticked that box. There was no option for Bahai.

"When they sent back the card, they said, 'OK, you may register,' and in the place of religion, they wrote, Islam."

"In my belief, you're not supposed to lie about your faith even when facing death. So I wrote back, I was not Muslim. They said, 'Good luck, you can't enter university.'"

Like Shirin, Mona had only one option - the clandestine university, and it was an unforgettable experience.

"I remember the faces of all my friends who were coming from other cities in Iran, from far away," she says. "It took them maybe 16 - 20 hours to get to Tehran. Their faces looked so tired.

"It was really hard. We had one class from 08:00 to 12:00 in the east of Tehran, and the second class from 14:00 to 18:00 on the west side - it was exhausting! Sometimes we didn't have physical teachers, we had them over Skype, who were teaching us from the US, Canada."

After she graduated, she faced the same difficulties Shirin had experienced a decade earlier - and opted for a similar solution.

In 2009, she escaped to New York, via Austria, under an international religious refugee repatriation programme.

When I met her recently in Joe's Coffee, a lively meeting place for students and teachers at Columbia University, she had just completed her MA in Psychology. She was over the moon.

"It feels amazing, I can't believe it's all done and I'll even have a graduation! When I graduated from the BIHE, they arrested all my teachers, Bahai teachers. And we never had a graduation day."

The US is home to one of the largest Bahai populations in the world, their presence dating back at least to 1912, when Abdul Baha, the son of the faith's founder, Baha'u'llah, spent 11 months in the country, promoting the religion.

The BIHE degrees are accepted by most US universities - as Mona's was at Columbia University - and many BIHE volunteers are based in the US.

"Students and instructors in Iran can end up in jail just for being students and instructors. So they are not only doing something that is hard for them to do, but dangerous to do," says Prof Thane Terril, a convert to the Bahai faith who now runs online teacher training courses for post-graduate students.

"The motivation for the students is like a person in the desert without water."

Sipping coffee in the café of the former hotel, Ansonia, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where Abdul Baha once stayed, Shirin says that she could never understand what the regime has against the Bahais.

"Abdul Baha emphasised that the East and West must meet," she says. "I think the collective approach to life is what we think of as being the oriental or Eastern culture, and the individualist approach to life is considered to be Western. And when the two merge, you have a very beautiful culture."