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Over 400 Dervishes arrested in the last three months and Yarvar Mohamad Salas sentenced to death

IOPHR (04.05.2018) - On the 3rd of May 2018, a number of MEP's released an Urgent Appeal demanding the Iranian Regime stop the execution of Mr. Yarvar Mohamad Salas, release Dr. Noor Ali Tabandeh from house arrest and cease the persecution of Gonabadi Dervishes in Iran.

A summary of the appeal reads as follows: Mr. Salas has been wrongfully convicted of the murder of three police officers, despite the fact that the case against him remains incomplete and unsubstantiated. During his trial, evidence surfaced that proved Mr. Salas's innocence which was completely ignored by the court.

Numerous legal violations occurred during the trial process with Mr. Salas being forced to confess under duress, lack of access to legal representation, and failure to observe the defendant's rights as set out in the Iranian constitution and penal code. Mr. Salas has been threatened, tortured and is now facing execution for a crime he did not commit.

The Iranian regime is suppressing and persecuting Sufi Gonabadi Dervishes solely because of their belief system. Senior officials representing the regime have explicitly stated that one of the top priorities of the regime is to target and attack all Dervishes in Iran through nationwide ethnic cleansing. Since the 19th February over 400 Gonabadi Dervishes have been arrested and the Regime has made clear that they will only release the imprisoned Dervishes if they give up their beliefs.

Furthermore, the regime is also targeting the spiritual leader of this Gonabadi Sufi Order, Dr. Noor Ali Tabandeh, who has been placed under house arrest since 20th February 2018, cutting him off from all forms of communication, and denying him critical medical care and assistance.

We call on President Rouhani to take immediate action to put an end to these injustices and violations of human rights, to stop the execution of Mr. Salas, to order a new trial to take place and to order the immediate release of Dr. Noor Ali Tabandeh from house arrest.

We call on the Iranian regime to uphold fundamental human rights, prisoners' rights, the right to freedom of religion, thought and conscience, and to restore Dignity, Freedom, and Justice as set out in international conventions.

Do non-Muslims have the right to hold elected public office or not?

World Watch Monitor (20.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2vCxj5v> - In Iran, which is 90-95 per cent Shia Muslim, the passing of a date set for a decision over whether a non-Muslim can hold an elected public office is significant for the country's religious minorities and their rights.

The date, April 5, passed without that decision being made for a Zoroastrian voted onto his city council. After Sepanta Niknam was elected last year in Yazd, an historic city in central Iran with many ancient Zoroastrian sites, a losing Muslim conservative candidate protested, on the grounds that a non-Muslim should not be elected over a Muslim. Niknam, who had already served a four-year term as Councillor, received three times as many votes as Ali Asghar Bargheri, who came 45th.

Following Bagheri's complaint, in September 2017, a few months after the election, the Guardian Council appointed by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei suspended Niknam's position on the theological grounds that a non-Muslim should not rule over a Muslim. (The non-elected Guardian Council determines if the laws passed by the Parliament are in line with Sharia).

"Sepanta's suspension from a position he was democratically elected for highlights an emerging battle over the right of Iran's religious minorities to run for office," Mansour Borji of Article 18, a London-based advocacy organisation, told World Watch Monitor. "Sepanta was voted for by Muslims and non-Muslims alike and won against a candidate openly backed by the country's ultra-conservative elite. This vividly illustrates the fact that the majority of Iranians do not share the same discriminatory values as those of the ruling clergy."

Iranians – Muslim and non-Muslim – took to social media to express their disdain for the suspension. Then, after the Head of the Parliament and President also expressed their opposition to the suspension, the matter was referred to the Expediency Council, an

independent body created by the Supreme Leader to reconcile the Guardian Council and Parliament if they face deadlock.

In October 2017, Niknam had to take six months' authorised leave of absence, during which the Expediency Council was to deliver its ruling. According to Borji, the Expediency Council is trying to delay until the issue is forgotten.

In April 2017, Ahmad Jannati, a conservative cleric and senior member of the Guardian Council, said religious minorities should not be allowed to stand as candidates at all, since this violated the wishes of the Islamic Republic's founding father, Ruhollah Khomeini.

In October 1979, at the very beginning of Iran's Revolution, Khomeini said candidates should "first of all be Muslims... Second, they should believe in our movement. They should be trustworthy and sincere in their faith".

Jannati said that, as it was against Khomeini's wishes for non-Muslims to rule, it was "therefore against the tenets of Sharia [Islamic law]".

Borji says that the reinstatement of Niknam's position is unlikely. "Today, Sepanta's fight for reinstatement is a fight against religious discrimination and against the lack of respect for people's vote and their choices," he said.

Niknam recently took to Twitter to say that he did not want an exception to be made for him. "I proclaim here that until this issue is resolved for all religious minorities, I will not return to the [City] Council," he wrote, in Farsi. "I will only go back to the Yazd Council if the law permitting religious minorities to be elected is reaffirmed by the Expediency Council. If this is not going to be principally dealt with, and this issue is only resolved for me personally, and the problem remains for minorities in future elections, I will not attend the Council meetings."

Video of Iran 'morality police' wrestling with woman sparks outrage

Female officer shown slapping woman and wrestling her to floor because her hijab was loose

By Saeed Kamali Dehghan

The Guardian (19.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2HhHBx5> - Shocking video footage of a young woman being wrestled to the floor by Iranian "morality police" because her hijab was loose has sparked outrage after it was posted online.

The footage shows members of the special taskforce tackling the woman, believed to be in her mid-20s, in Tehran. Under Iranian law, it is compulsory for women to cover themselves from head to toe in public, but many defy the boundaries by wearing loose hijab that shows their hair.

The video shows two young friends, one wearing a maghnaeh (similar to a nun's cowl) and the other wearing a loose headscarf that reveals part of her hair. The latter is verbally cautioned, before a female police officer slaps her in the face and wrestles her to the floor. The young woman is heard screaming repeatedly: "Let me go, let me go."

Within hours of the video going viral, Iran's minister of interior, Abdolreza Rahmani-Fazil, ordered an inquiry, according to an official statement that called the incident "an unusual treatment of a woman at the hands of the morality police".

The statement insinuated that the young woman had provoked the police by swearing at them when they asked her to respect the law. But it said the reaction of the police was also "unconventional".

Masoumeh Ebtekar, Iran's vice-president for women's affairs, denounced the treatment of the young woman on Twitter. "How could this treatment be justified?" she tweeted. "Even if they were insulted, should the police react like this? I categorically condemn this behaviour and will pursue the matter. This is a harsh and anti-religious treatment that no human deserves."

The footage shows one of the young women threatening the police with legal action, to which an officer can be heard responding: "You can't do a damn shit."

The incident, which happened on Wednesday, emerged a few months after scores of women staged protests across Iran in which they climbed on to telecom boxes, took off their headscarves and waved them aloft on sticks. The Guardian understands that the two women in the video were not out in public protesting, but celebrating a birthday.

The video was posted on Instagram by Masih Alinejad, a US-based Iranian activist behind a number of campaigns fighting the compulsory wearing of the hijab, and has been viewed more than 1.6m times. Her post drew more than 21,700 comments in half a day. "The video broke my heart," commented one user.

"People are angry because such mistreatments are happening over and over again. People have lost their hope because the morality police acts with impunity in the name of law," Alinejad told the Guardian.

According to the information Alinejad has received, the victim became so frail after being wrestled that the forces did not take her to the police station, but arrested a couple who had intervened on their behalf.

Alinejad said: "People in Iran can't fathom this and demand how in the 21st century, someone can be beaten because of her hair. That's why after all these years such treatments take people by surprise and cause public shock."

Not every woman wearing a hijab in Iran does so under pressure, but millions are against it being obligatory, which has been an integral policy of the Islamic republic ever since the 1979 revolution. Iran's moderate president, Hassan Rouhani, has made clear that his administration is against enforcing the law so harshly, but his powers are limited when it comes to the conduct of the police, who are under the influence of the unelected faction of the Iranian establishment.

In February, Iran said it had arrested 29 women accused of being "deceived" into joining the telecoms box protests. Many are still in jail and some have been given lengthy prison terms.

Iranian Christian arrested 45 days ago tells family: 'I'm in Evin Prison'

World Watch Monitor (16.04.18) - <https://bit.ly/2H3yax5> - An Iranian Christian convert, about whom nothing had been heard since his arrest 45 days ago, was able to contact his family over the weekend to let them know he is being held in the notorious Evin Prison, in the capital Tehran.

A spokesman for advocacy organisation Article 18, Kiaa Aalipour, told World Watch Monitor that 54-year-old Aziz Majidzadeh has yet to face formal charges but that interrogations have focused on activities related to his Christian faith.

Aziz was with 20 other Christians in a workshop near the city of Karaj, just west of Tehran, on 2 March, when security forces raided the premises at around noon.

Aalipour said the security forces "arrested one of the friends of this group of Christians at his home and forced him to come with them to the workshop. They came in and started filming everything, saying that they were friends of their friend and were shooting footage for a Persian-language Christian satellite channel".

Most of the group were released after they had been interrogated, but Majidzadeh, who has been arrested before for activities related to his faith, was beaten and detained, according to Aalipour, who added that there are growing concerns about his health.

Evin Prison

In February World Watch Monitor reported how Christians have reported high levels of abuse during their detention in Evin Prison.

Maryam Rostampour and Marziyeh Amirizadeh, speaking in November, said they experienced relentless interrogation and physical threats during their time in the prison in 2009/10.

It has been eight years since their release, but Rostampour said: "When people experience living in Evin Prison they will never be the same again. The stress is too much. We can't be the same people. We can't be as happy as before. We don't enjoy activities like normal people because all the time we think of those who are still there."

Evin Prison was visited by a delegation of 11 Iranian MPs in January to investigate alleged abuse. During their visit, the MPs spoke with four detainees while surrounded by intelligence officers, drawing criticism from the deputy head of parliament's Legal and Judicial Commission, Mohammad Kazemi, who said: "It would have been better if they'd stayed away, since we had to talk to the detainees in private."

The UN's former Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Asma Jahangir, also expressed her concern about the treatment of Iranian prisoners in August last year.

Dr Nooralı Tabandeh, the head spiritual leader of the Gonabadi Sufi order, under house arrest since 20th February

Human Rights Without Frontiers urges the President of Iran to restore the full freedom of Dr Tabandeh

HRWF (16.04.2018) - Since 20th February 2018, Dr Nooralı Tabandeh, the head spiritual leader of the Gonabadi Sufi order in Iran with approximately 10 million followers, has been under house arrest. This was revealed by himself during a short video clip. In this short video recording dated 6th March he sends his greeting to the Dervishes and Muslims and the people of Iran. Several police officers have been stationed outside as well as inside the privacy of his house.

At the age of 91, Dr. Tabandeh is suffering from severe leg pains and is in need of full-time assistance and medical care. Despite this, as of 18th March, the Security Forces have forced out his personal Doctor and medical care assistance, and all his trusted companions, leaving Dr. Tabandeh unaccompanied. He is being denied critical care within the confines of his own house, where he is under complete house arrest.

Dr. Tabandeh has always been a champion of peace and tolerance, bringing together diverse groups in harmony, and tirelessly serving the community all his life. He is now being denied his basic fundamental rights and the necessary medical care and support and is falsely imprisoned in his own home.

Human Rights Without Frontiers calls on Hassan Rohani, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Sardar Rahimi, to immediately put an end to the house arrest of Dr Nooralı Tabandeh and to give him access to medical assistance.

Appeal of 24 Members of the European Parliament

On 7th of March 2018, 24 Members of the European Parliament published a Public Appeal condemning the massive repression of the Gonabadi Dervishes and their spiritual leader Mr Nooralı Tabandeh in Iran:

On February 19, the Iranian authorities attacked the Gonabadi Sufi protesters in Tehran during their peaceful protest against the detention of one of their members, Nematollah Riahi, 72. Mr Riahi had come to Tehran to help protect the leader of the Gonabadi Sufi Order, Dr. Noor Ali Tabandeh and his home that had been besieged by the Iranian authorities on February 5, 2018. So far, at least 300 arrests have been made, and many more Dervishes are currently imprisoned that have not been officially recorded with no information on the well-being or whereabouts of the detainees for more than a week. There are reports of torture at Evin, Fashafouyeh, and Gharchak prisons, and persecutions and intimidation, invasion of residential houses in the 7th Area of Golestan in Pasdaran Avenue and occasions of public torture of the Sufis on the streets of Tehran.

There are numerous alarming reports that Iranian authorities are systematically persecuting the Dervishes in Iran. In March 2017, the UN special rapporteur for Iran expressed concern over the state targeting of members of Sufi groups, saying they "continue to face arbitrary arrest, harassment, and detention and are often accused of national security crimes." The leader of the Gonabadi Dervishes Dr. Noor Ali Tabandeh, 90, and his followers have received death threats and live in fear of violence. It is ironic that several million Dervishes, of which the Gonabadi order is the most numerous,

representing the centuries-long tradition of peaceful meditation and mystical practices, are now considered as potential threat to the existing regime.

Sardar Rahimi, Tehran's Chief of police has explicitly stated, February 22, 2018, on national TV, the voice of the ruling system in Iran, that he had clearly considered the idea of using heavy-handed tactics such as the use RPG's (Rocket-Propelled Grenades) against the Sufi's during the recent protests.

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

We call on the EU's HR/VP Mogherini to immediately address this issue with the Iranian authorities and call for full respect of human rights and prisoners' rights, for the right of freedom of religion and belief, the right for freedom of assembly, the right for freedom of thought as set out in international conventions.

Tunne Kelam, MEP, EPP Group

Lars Adaktusson, MEP, EPP Group

Petras Auštrevičius, MEP, ALDE Group

Heinz K. Becker, MEP, EPP Group

Franc Bogovič, MEP, EPP Group

Michal Boni, MEP, EPP Group

Mark Demesmaeker, MEP, ECR Group

Gérard Deprez, MEP, ALDE Group

José Inácio Faria, MEP, EPP Group

Luke Ming Flanagan, MEP, GUE-NGL Group

Ana Maria Gomes, MEP, S&D Group

Maria Grapini, MEP, S&D Group

Gunnar Hökmark, MEP, EPP Group

Anthea McIntyre, MEP, ECR Group

Lukas Mandl, MEP, EPP Group

Ramona Manescu, MEP, EPP Group

Marijana Petir, MEP, EPP Group

Jozo Radoš, MEP, ALDE Group

Petri Sarvamaa, MEP, EPP Group

Branislav Škripek, MEP, ECR Group

Jaromir Štětina, MEP, EPP Group

Bodil Valero, MEP, The Greens/EFA

Jan Zahradil, MEP, ECR Group

Milan Zver, MEP, EPP Group

To read the entire letter on European Parliaments website please go to the following link:
<http://www.eppgroup.eu/news/Public-Appeal->

Why the Human Rights Violations in Iran Should Matter to the West

IOPHR (10.04.2018) – <http://www.iophr.org> - After forty years of continued human rights violations by the Iranian regime, it is imperative that the West finally takes firm steps to challenge the brutal clampdown of the Iranian regime on its own citizens, as they desperately attempt to voice their discontent through various types of protests.

Ever since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Iranian regime has pursued a long term multi-pronged policy of suppression of all internal opposition voices in order to dominate every part of the religious, legislative, judicial, social and economic agenda of Iran and its citizens. This policy, in conjunction with its methodical clandestine plan to export its ideology, firstly within the Middle East, and then to other regions of the world, has been the hallmark of the Iranian regime's engagement with its own citizens and the world. These policies also have global consequences through many avenues, such as the mass immigration of people from war torn countries, as we have witnessed in the immigration of Syrian refugees to Europe.

The Iranian regime's policy of expansion is not only based on suppression of all forms of internal freedom, but also skillful manipulation of global events in its favour. For example, by disguising its true intentions, within the context of global events, in the name of "fighting the threats of Extremism" posed by groups such as Daesh or ISIS in Iraq or Al-Qaida in Afghanistan. Faced with such policies, the Western governments have often failed to recognise the long-term plan of the regime, just as they have been equally slow in responding to the human rights violations that occur in Iran on a daily basis. The West's fixation with threats posed by the Iranian nuclear enrichment process, and the Western governments' consistently vague or intermittent condemnation of human rights violations in Iran, has only exacerbated the oppression of Iranians by the regime. Sanctions based solely on nuclear enrichment have also given the signal to Iran that the West only cares about its nuclear policy, and not about its human rights violations. All of which has led to the increased oppression of Iranian citizens and the slow, yet unswerving export of the Iranian regime's extremist ideology.

The regime's oppression within its own borders has taken many forms, such as the house arrests of non-conformist voices (Mr Karroubi, Mr Mousavi and Mrs Rahnavard), the suppression of all forms of peaceful protests on trumped up charges like sedition or Moharebeh (the charge of "being an enemy of God"), and total elimination of any group they see as a threat, such as the 1988 mass execution of 30,000 members of the MEK.

The recent protests, and the subsequent arrest of 5,000 people, has led to further repression of the Iranian people, including suppression of the protest movement against imposed Hijab by Iranian women, which resulted in a number of arrests and the

imprisonment of many women. In fact, in Iran of today, all forms of protests act as signals for ever increasing arrests and clampdowns. Religious persecution has been one of the cornerstones of the Iranian regime's plan to suppress all forms of worship that do not adhere to its fundamentalist religious doctrine. Consistent persecution of Baha'is, Christians (in particular Christian converts), Zoroastrians, Jews, and even Sunni Muslims exemplify the intolerant views of this regime. Moreover, following the recent Sufi protests, which led to the arrest and torture of many Sufi men and women, the regime has instigated a clandestine plan to put influential human rights advocate and spiritual leader of the Sufi community, Dr Noor Ali Tabandeh, under house arrest.

The suppression of Sufism is nothing new in Iran, and has been prevalent since 1979, with many Gonabadi' Sufi houses of worship being destroyed or shut down, and many other Sufi groups under consistent repression by the regime. The sectarian religious approach of the regime, of divide and conquer, has only increased, to the point that they are willing to openly prosecute Shia Muslims, such as Gonabadi Sufis, who have a long history of following the Shia branch of Islam. From all these actions, it is clear the Iranian regime's policy is purely ideological, which sees Islam as a useful tool for exporting their own extreme ideology, under the guise of "Islam".

At a time when Western countries are trying to counter extremist religious doctrines within their own borders, the survival of tolerant religious and ethnic diversities, both within the East and West, is of the utmost importance. Spiritual paths, such as Sufism, have long been associated with tolerance and unity across all races and beliefs. In fact, within the East, in terms of tolerance and non-violence, Sufism is very much in line with the path of Buddhism, taught by spiritual leaders like the Dalai Lama. Just as the Chinese government, 60 years ago, pushed the Dalai Lama out of his homeland, so as to supplant its own brand of Buddhism, the Iranian regime is now following a similar strategy, by putting the head of the largest Sufi order in Iran, Dr Tabandeh, under house arrest. This is supplemented by a hidden agenda of propagating misinformation and vilification, such as equating Sufis to "Daesh" within their Friday prayer ceremonies across Iran, the regime continues to step up their plan of mass elimination of this peaceful spiritual group.

Therefore, it is time for the West to stand up and speak against human rights violations within Iran. Although human rights violations are committed by many countries such as North Korea, none of them have had the same track record of exporting their fundamentalist ideology with the success and determination of Iran, over the past forty years. Hence, by standing up against Iran's lack of respect towards human rights and even imposing sanctions based on the regimes human rights violations, the West will not only stop the expansionary path of the regime's ideology, but will also send a strong decisive message to the Iranian regime that their barbaric policies towards their own citizens will not be tolerated, thus giving hope to the oppressed voices in Iran.

To do so would echo the voice of Prince Charles in his recent Easter message of tolerance and peace amongst different faiths, who in reference to Christian persecution stated, "I want to assure them that they are not forgotten and that they are in our prayers!" For one cannot be tolerant in the face of intolerance, as by doing nothing we allow the proliferation of intolerance. And as Pastor Niemöller wisely said, "First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out— because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me!"

Urgent action: 11 women ill-treated and arbitrarily detained

At least 11 women from Iran's Gonabadi Dervish religious minority have been arbitrarily detained in inhumane conditions, without access to their lawyers, since 20 February following the violent dispersal of a protest held by Gonabadi Derivshes in Tehran. Some urgently need medical care for injuries sustained from beatings at the time of their arrest.

Amnesty International (29.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2J4IZ2O> - On 19 February, security forces violently arrested at least 60 women from Iran's persecuted Gonabadi Dervish community for participating in a protest in Tehran which turned violent after security forces resorted to beatings, firearm use, water cannons and tear gas to disperse the crowd. The women were taken to Vozara detention centre where they said they were subjected to intrusive body searches by female officers, intimidating interrogations, insults and yelling. In the following 24 hours, the authorities transferred 10 of the women to the quarantine section of Shahr-e Rey prison near Tehran and released the rest. Those transferred are **Shokoufeh Yadollahi, Sepideh Moradi, Maryam Farisani, Nazila Nouri, Sima Entesari, Shima Entesari, Shahnaz Kiani, Maryam Barakouhi, Elham Ahmadi,** and **Avisha Jalaledin**. After several days, an 11th woman, **Sedigheh Safabakht**, who was apparently held in Evin prison before, was also transferred to Shahr-e Rey prison. There are reports that some women are undergoing late-night interrogations involving verbal abuse and threats.

Shahr-e Rey prison is a disused chicken farm that holds hundreds of women convicted of violent offences in conditions falling far below the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules). Common complaints include urine-stained floors, lack of ventilation, insufficient and filthy bathroom facilities, prevalence of contagious diseases, poor quality food containing small pieces of stone and salty water. In recent days, women prisoners have complained that fumes have escaped from the drainage system, filling their rooms with foul odours. As a result, Shima Entesari, who suffers from asthma, has experienced severe breathing difficulties requiring supplemental oxygen. Additionally, eyewitnesses have said that security forces severely beat Shokoufeh Yadollahi at the time of her arrest, resulting in head injuries. The authorities have denied her access to medical care apparently after she refused to be transferred to hospital in handcuffs and leg cuffs. There are reports that several women are suffering from vaginal bleeding due to blows inflicted to their perineum at the time of arrest.

Please write immediately in Persian, English or your own language calling on the Iranian authorities to:

- Release Shokoufeh Yadollahi, Sepideh Moradi, Maryam Farisani, Nazila Nouri, Sima Entesari, Shima Entesari, Shahnaz Kiani, Maryam Barakouhi, Elham Ahmadi, Avisha Jalaledin and Sedigheh Safabakht immediately and unconditionally as they are held for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of association and assembly;
- Ensure that, pending their release, they are granted access to their lawyers, provided with any medical care they need, and protected from torture and other ill-treatment;
- Take immediate steps to improve prison conditions at Shahr-e Rey prison in accordance with international law and standards, including the Nelson Mandela Rules, and allow international monitors to conduct inspection visits;
- Conduct an independent and transparent investigation into reports of the excessive use of force by security forces to suppress the protest held by Gonabadi Dervishes and bring those suspected of responsibility to account in fair trials.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 10 MAY 2018 TO:

High Council for Human Rights
Mohammad Javad Larijani
Esfaniar Boulevard, Niayesh Intersection
Vali Asr Avenue, Tehran, Iran
Salutation : Your Excellency

Head of Shahr-e Prison
Mehdi Mohammadi
Highway, Gharchak
Shahr-e Rey Iran
Salutation : Mr. Mehdi Mohammadi

And copies to:
President
Hassan Rouhani
Pasteur Street, Pasteur Square
Tehran, Iran
Twitter: @HassanRouhani

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please insert local diplomatic addresses below: Name Address 1 Address 2 Address 3 Fax Fax number Email Email address Salutation Salutation

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

Additional information

Several hundred Gonabadi Dervishes, both men and women, gathered outside the residence of their spiritual leader, Noor Ali Tabandeh, in an area of Tehran known as Golestan Haftom on the night of 19 February to protest against the authorities' intensified persecution of their community and to prevent the possible arrest of their leader. Those present at the protest reported that police and plain-clothes Basiji forces resorted to beatings with batons, electric cables and sharp objects, and the use of tear gas, water cannons and live ammunition to disperse the crowd, arresting over 300 people, including 60 women. Those present reported that security forces raided a nearby five-storey apartment building to which the protesters had escaped, released tear gas into the staircases of the building, formed a "tunnel" of batons and struck protesters repeatedly on their backs, heads and faces as they violently dragged them down the stairs and into police vans. Pictures and videos from the incident show protesters with lacerations and other wounds to their faces and bodies and bandaged heads and other body parts.

Amnesty International understands that about 170 of those arrested, many of whom had fallen unconscious, were transferred from the scene of the incident to hospital to undergo emergency treatment. In the days that followed, some of them were released while others were taken to Fashafouyeh prison near Tehran even though their medical treatment had not been completed. Some detainees were subsequently transferred from there to solitary confinement in Evin prison or Shapour detention centre, both in Tehran, for interrogations. During this period, their families were kept in the dark about their fate and whereabouts. There are serious concerns that they are facing torture and other ill-treatment, including through the denial of medical care for their injuries, and are under pressure to "confess". On 15 March, Tehran's Chief Prosecutor stated that 20 indictments have so far been issued against Gonabadi Dervishes and that number may increase to 100.

On 4 March, the family of one of the detainees, Mohammad Raji, was informed by the police that he had died from the injuries caused by repeated blows to his head. The details concerning the exact manner, place and time of death remain unclear. The authorities have only stated that he was fatally injured during the clashes and he died either during his transfer to hospital or after his admission. His family have emphasized that he was injured but alive at the time of his arrest on 19 February and expressed outrage at the concealment of his fate and whereabouts for 15 days following the arrest, and the authorities' refusal to clarify the sequence and timing of events that led to his death. In the clashes that occurred on 19 February, three police officers, Reza Emami, Mohammad Ali Bayrami and Reza Moradi Alamdar, and one Basij militiaman, Mohammad Hossein Haddadian, were also left dead. The officers were killed after they were run over by a bus. On 19 March, a Dervish man, Mohammad Salas, was held responsible for the fatal incident and sentenced to death for intentional murder. He had denied the charge during his trial and insisted that his act was not intentional. In his defence, he argued

that the accident was due to his poor eyesight, the disorienting effect of his injuries, which included a fractured skull and a broken arm, and his panicked rush to escape the area to avoid further beatings. On 20 February, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) aired a video "confession" from Mohammad Salas that was filmed while he was lying on a hospital bed severely injured. This violated the presumption of innocence and raised concerns that the statement may have been taken in coercive circumstances.

Gonabadi Dervishes in Iran consider themselves Shi'a Muslims. However, because of their Sufi beliefs and practices, the authorities have persistently subjected them to discrimination, harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention and attacks on their prayer houses. On 6 March 2018, the spiritual leader of Gonabadi Dervishes, Noor Ali Tabandeh, revealed in a video statement that the authorities were preventing him from leaving his home. He did not provide further information about his circumstances.

Name: Shokoufeh Yadollahi, Sepideh Moradi, Maryam Farisani, Nazila Nouri, Sima Entesari, Shima Entesari, Shahnaz Kiani, Maryam Barakouhi, Elham Ahmadi, Avisha Jalaedin and Sedigheh Safabakht
Gender m/f: all f

'Returnees' from Islamic universities for foreigners pose a danger to human and state security abroad/ Case study: Al Mustafa international University



HRWF (19.02.2018) - Foreign forms of controversial Islamic teachings introduced in various ways in Muslim majority countries threaten their traditional culture of tolerance and the peaceful relations between their various religious communities.

Iran attracts and trains foreign Shia theologians to export its theocratic model and Sharia practices which are incompatible with UN human rights standards.

Salafists and Wahhabis backed by Saudi Arabia and other states of the Arabic Peninsula are increasingly disturbing the homegrown peaceful Islam in Indonesia, the Maldives, and other countries in Central Asia.

The implantation of their Islamic universities and other educational institutions in such countries, in addition to the granting of scholarships for foreign education of imams and young students in theology, are part of their diversified strategies to export forms of Islam that are alien to local Islam, challenge the secular nature of some states and the separation of state and religion.

'Returnees' from universities such as Al Mustafa University in Iran pose a real danger to human and state security in their respective countries of origin.

Sentencing 'returnees' to prison terms, as it is the case in Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, because they have been educated abroad in 'suspicious universities' is a violation of human rights. *However* it is the right of a state to protect its population against radicalization and foreign ideologies that promote segregation between Muslims and non-Muslims as well as between men and women, discrimination on such a basis, physical punishments, degrading and inhumane treatments, as it is the case in Iran, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia.

Hassan Dai's study entitled by "**Iran's global network of Islamic schools public**" published by the Iranian American Forum in 2016 highlights the extent of the strategy used by Tehran to export its theocratic system. In his paper, the author addresses the following issues:

- Foreign clerics in Iran and the creation of Al Mustafa
- Al Mustafa's network: Africa - Al Mustafa School in Congo
- Tuition and support for students and their families
- Number of students and graduates
- Al Mustafa's goal: export of Revolution
- Shiism
- Promoting hatred against Israel
- Al Mustafa, a recruiting pool of Quds force

Human Rights Without Frontiers is presenting you below large excerpts from this paper that is available at <http://iranian-americans.com/irans-export-of-islamic-fundamentalism-al-mustafa-global-training-centers-2/>.

Summary

In February 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini and a group of clergymen attached to him, seized the power in Iran. From the onset, Khomeini's regime utilized all the means and tools in its disposal to establish and fortify its brand of fundamentalism in Iran and export it throughout the Islamic world.

For the past 37 years, the Iranian regime has pursued a two-faceted strategy to export its revolution; in one hand, it has created and supported radical armed groups across the Middle East, on top of them the Lebanese Hezbollah. On the other hand, various “Cultural” and “religious” organizations were created in Iran to disseminate the regime’s ideology in the Islamic world.

Al Mustafa international university founded in 2007 is one of the most important among these organizations. Funded and controlled by the Iranian regime, Al Mustafa trains foreign Shia clerics, scholars and missionaries. Its main campuses are in Iran and have more than one hundred seminaries, Islamic schools and religious centers around the world. The Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is the highest authority of Al Mustafa University.

Al Mustafa has currently over 40.000 students, half of them studying in University campuses in Iran. There are nearly 10.000 female students and 3500 teaching staff.

Since 2007, nearly 30.000 clerics and Islamic scholars have graduated from Al Mustafa branches, a good portion of them have been hired by the university as teaching staff or missionaries sent to different countries around the globe.

Al Mustafa’s vast global network and its growing army of clerics and missionaries is a formidable tool to generate grassroots support in foreign countries for the Iranian regime’s ideology, its foreign policy, its position in the Islamic world and its quest to dominate the Middle East. Al Mustafa is also a recruiting pool for the Revolutionary Guards’ Quds Force or other Iranian Institutions responsible for terrorism or military activities abroad.



Al Mustafa's main campus in Qom

Number of students and graduates

Al Mustafa does not report the exact number of its students in Iran or in foreign branches. However, by examining Al Mustafa’s current and old website available in web archives, news reports or the declarations by the University’s executives, we reach the

approximate numbers of 40.000 current students of which 10.000 are women. Half of Al Mustafa's students are in Iran campuses. The University has had 30.000 graduates and employs 3500 teaching staff.



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Photo: M.H.Emami

AhluBayt News Agency

Al Mustafa graduates receive turbans

For example, Alireza Aarafi, Al Mustafa's President declared in August 2014 that 40.000 people study at the University. In February 2016, the head of "Information Science" department at Shiraz University gave an interview and detailed the number of foreign clerics studying in Iran and declared that 20.000 foreigners study at Al Mustafa campuses in Iran. In a speech on February 2015, President of Al Mustafa declared that 30.000 students had graduated since 2007.



RASA



Al Mustafa female students in Qom campus

Al-Mustafa has a distinct department for its female students called “**Bent-ol-Hoda High Education Institution**” with campuses in Ghom, Isfahan and Mashhad. According to an August 2013 report 9000 female students were studying in Al Mustafa, of which 6500 students in foreign branches. According to Hojatolislam Safouraei, president of Bent-ol-Hoda, the new campus under construction in Ghom will open in the summer of 2016 with a capacity for 2000 female students.

Al Mustafa’s goal: export of Revolution

Al Mustafa’s vast global network and its growing army of clerics and missionaries is a formidable tool for the Iranian regime to export its brand of Islam and generate grassroots support for the Iranian regime’s ideology and assist its quest to dominate the Islamic world.



Iran Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei meeting with Al Mustafa students and staff, Qom, 10/25/2010

In his speech to Al Mustafa students and staff on October 25, 2010 in Qom, the Supreme Leader explained the Iranian mandate to spread “pure Islamic thoughts” and liberate the Islamic nation from the jug of global arrogance led by the United States. He emphasized the role that Al Mustafa plays in carrying out this mission: (English translation by Khamenei’s official website)

“The first lesson that the Islamic Revolution and the auspicious Islamic Republic taught us was that we should think beyond our borders and turn our attention to the vast arena of the Islamic Ummah. Our magnanimous Imam taught us that our attention should be focused on the great Islamic Ummah. Although Iran was extremely frustrated under the pressure of tyranny and colonialism during the rule of Shah, was being crushed by the

pressure, and it needed to be saved but, the essential pressure and historical aggression was focused on the Islamic Ummah.

For several centuries, the great Islamic Ummah, which has been in one of the most strategic locations in the world, was suffering from weakness, defeat, backwardness, colonialism and material and scientific poverty due to the interference of superpowers, greed of powerful governments and belligerence of the arrogant powers. The attention of our Islamic Revolution was focused on the Islamic world. Its attention was focused on helping the Islamic Ummah get rid of the arrogant powers' hand of oppression and aggression. We learned this from our Imam, and this has been the clear path of the Islamic Republic up until now. Part of the great work is what you are doing. You have gathered here from nearly one hundred countries in order to become familiar with the pure teachings of Islam."

On February 8, 2016, Al Mustafa's vice President declared: "Export of revolution has always been one of the most important goals for the Islamic Republic. Al Mustafa plays a role in preparing the ground and attain this goal. Al Mustafa has used the Islamic soft power in the region and prepare the ground for Iran's hard power (military) to be present in the Middle East and successfully oppose the global arrogance."

Similarly, the dean of language and culture department at Al Mustafa has also declared that "our goal is the export of revolution." In February 2015, the Supreme Leader's representative in Isfahan emphasized that "Al Mustafa has taken effective steps for the export of our revolution."

Al Mustafa, a recruiting pool for Quds force

Since the start of civil war in Syria and the Iranian military intervention to save the Bashar Assad regime, there have been numerous reports about Al Mustafa's students killed in Syria funerals held in Iran for them In March 2016, one of Al Mustafa's directors declared that "some of the fighters deployed to Syria are the University's students and clerics."

Alireza Tavassoli, the chief commander of Fatemiyon, the Afghanis division of revolutionary guards fighting in Syria who was killed in 2014, was one of Al Mustafa's clerics.

The Iranian revolutionary Guards employs different tactics to recruit new members or fighters for Syrian war. Each years, hundreds of thousands of very young Iranian students are organized in tours labeled as "Caravans of light" (Rahian -e- Noor) and sent to the old Iran-Iraq war battle field where the martyrs are venerated and the cult of martyrdom is promoted. The preachers remind the visitors that the war with Iraq was in fact part of the fight against global arrogance, a fight that continues today. The visitors are told that the martyrs are alive and watching them and asking them to join this holly war against the US and its surrogates.

Iranian regime uses the same tactic to recruit among Al Mustafa students or graduates. Each year thousands of Al Mustafa students from Iran campuses or branches outside Iran are sent to these battle field. This is a report on 700 Al Mustafa students visiting the battle fields and, another report about a 250 students and families. In this report by Iranian press, an Argentinian graduate of Al Mustafa who is teaching at the University branches, is taking a group of Latin American students to the battle fields to "venerate the Martyrs of war between Islam and global arrogance".

As a result of Al Mustafa's ideological teaching and financial incentives provided to the students, a good part of Al Mustafa clerics gradually become unconditional supporters of

Iranian regime. It is not surprising that many of them are sent to Syria and other places to assist the Quds force. Al Mustafa students in Iran are also ordered to participate in state-organized rallies such as the protest against Charlie Hebdo magazine for drawing Muhammad cartoon or the rally against Bahrain government.

Iranian Christian convert detained since before Christmas

World Watch Monitor (16.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2HwiYtJ> - An Iranian convert to Christianity arrested more than two months ago remains in prison in the conservative north-western city of Tabriz, according to rights group Article 18.

Ali Amini, known by his friends as Philip, was arrested by revolutionary guards at his workshop in the city on 10 December. His mobile phone and laptop were also confiscated.

His elderly father was present during the raid, and watched as his son was taken away. Amini is married and has two young children, aged one and three.

"Every year, pressure on Christians increases ahead of Christmas," Article 18 reported, adding that four other Christians were arrested over the Christmas period in 2017 – in Karaj, a city just to the west of the capital Tehran.

Four UN officials recently expressed concern over three other Christians sentenced to between 10 and 15 years in prison last year. Their appeals were due to take place on 4 February, but were postponed. A fourth Christian, Kaviyan Fallah-Mohammadi, was also sentenced alongside them.

"We are deeply concerned by the long jail sentences imposed at a previous hearing on Pastor Victor Bet Tamraz, Amin Afshar Naderi and Hadi Asgari for allegedly 'conducting evangelism' and 'illegal house church activities', and similar charges that, according to the authorities, amount to acting against national security, completely contrary to Iran's international obligations," said a statement by the four officials, including Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and Asma Jahangir, who was Special Rapporteur on Iran until her death on Sunday (11 February).

"We are additionally concerned about the lack of healthcare made available to them while in detention and, in particular, about the current health condition of Mr. Asgari, who remains in prison," they added.

Asma Jahangir previously expressed her concern about the treatment of Iranian prisoners, referencing a prison in Karaj, where at least one Christian – Ebrahim Firouzi – is currently being held and last year went on hunger strike to protest against Iran's treatment of Christians.

Amnesty International has also spoken out about the mistreatment of Iranian Christians in prison, referencing the case of Maryam Naghash Zargaran when it accused Iran of "cruel" denial of medical care in its prisons.

In their recent statement, the UN experts added: "We are aware of several other reported cases in which members of the Christian minority have received heavy sentences after being charged with 'threatening national security', either for converting people or for attending house churches.

"This shows a disturbing pattern of individuals being targeted because of their religion or beliefs, in this case a religious minority in the country.

"Members of the Christian minority in Iran, particularly those who have converted to the faith, are facing severe discrimination and religious persecution.

"The authorities must ensure fair trials for all, including the religious minorities in the country. We also urge the Government to immediately and unconditionally release all those who have been arrested and detained for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief."

Iranian convert to Christianity – 'If I went back, I'd be killed'

An asylum seeker who fled Iran over fears he would be killed for converting to Christianity is one of 300 to be baptised at a Cardiff church in the past two years.

Mohabat News (06.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2EXru3f> - Conversion from Islam to Christianity is punishable by death in Iran and converters said their decisions mean they can never go home.

Its constitution recognises the faith of Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians.

But people from a Muslim background are not free to worship in a church.

Daniel, not his real name, fled to the UK after authorities in Iran discovered he was worshipping Jesus in an underground Christian movement known as "house churches".

Now living in Cardiff, he officially converted from Islam when he was baptised two years ago.

Daniel, 31, said he was in no doubt he would be killed if he returned to Iran.

"If I went back, the authorities would arrest me. They would put me in jail and I would be killed, I would be hanged," he said.

"They will kill me, me and my family. I am not afraid because I will be meeting Jesus but I am afraid about my family."

Daniel claims an Iranian Christian convert friend was murdered and his remains were scattered outside the doors of four churches in his home city as a warning to others thinking of renouncing Islam.

In the past two years, 324 asylum-seekers have been baptised by Tredegarville Baptist Church in Cardiff, where 95% of the congregation are immigrants.

The majority baptised there are Iranian but some are Kurds and Afghans.

Pastor Phylip Rees, who has baptised many asylum seekers in Cardiff and helps with their bids to remain in the UK, said he was in no doubt the vast majority who attend the church were genuine in their faith.

He said he seen evidence Iranian converts at the church had suffered torture in their homeland, including one man who claims he was branded by the authorities.

Pastor Rees also rejected suggestions some parishioners could be using baptism as a way to secure permanent residence. He said he had refused to support applications previously when he had doubts.

Home Office guidelines for examining asylum claims state the credibility of a faith conversion "needs to be established to a reasonable degree of likelihood".

It said that was likely to include being baptised, preparing for baptism, attending worship and being known to the church's leadership and fellow believers.

The Home Office said: "Those who demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution in their country on account of their religion or belief are not expected to return there."

There are no official figures for genuine religious asylum seekers and some in the congregation said they had been waiting more than six years for a decision to be made about their claim.

But Iranian Christian groups are growing in number and can now be found in churches in cities including Glasgow, Liverpool and Birmingham.

Without them, Pastor Rees said the future of some churches would have been uncertain.

"Tredegarville would have closed but for this opportunity to join the Lord in his work of reaching these people," Pastor Rees said.

"I'm sure that the other churches would say that the people who are coming to them from other lands as refugees and asylum seekers are a blessing to them as they are to us."

Iran must ensure rights of Christian minority and fair trial for the accused – UN experts

OHCHR (2.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2E2djgj> - UN human rights experts* have called on Iran to ensure a fair and transparent final hearing for three Iranian Christians who are due to appear before the Revolutionary Court in Tehran this weekend.

"We are deeply concerned by the long jail sentences imposed at a previous hearing on Pastor Victor Bet Tamraz, Amin Afshar Naderi and Hadi Asgari for allegedly 'conducting evangelism' and 'illegal house church activities', and similar charges that, according to the authorities, amount to acting against national security, completely contrary to Iran's international obligations under the UDHR and the ICCPR" the four Special Rapporteurs said in a joint statement.

"We are additionally concerned about the lack of healthcare made available to them while in detention and, in particular, about the current health condition of Mr. Asgari who remains in prison," they added.

"We strongly call on the Government to ensure that the final review hearing on Sunday is fair and transparent, in accordance with Iran's obligations under international human rights law," the experts said.

The Revolutionary Court judge has the power to end the case, confirm the sentences or refer the case to the Supreme Court, with the men either freed on bail or jailed in the meantime.

The three Christians were given provisional jail sentences of 10 years at a previous hearing in July. Mr. Naderi received an additional five years for blasphemy.

The experts say they are also concerned that the prosecution of the three Christians is not an isolated case.

"We are aware of several other reported cases in which members of the Christian minority have received heavy sentences after being charged with 'threatening national security', either for converting people or for attending house churches," they said.

"This shows a disturbing pattern of individuals being targeted because of their religion or beliefs, in this case a religious minority in the country.

"Members of the Christian minority in Iran, particularly those who have converted to the faith, are facing severe discrimination and religious persecution."

The UN experts stressed that it was "of paramount importance" for the Iranian Government to abide by its obligations under international human rights law.

"The authorities must ensure fair trials for all, including the religious minorities in the country," they said.

"We also urge the Government to immediately and unconditionally release all those who have been arrested and detained for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief."

The UN experts notified the Government of Iran about their concerns.

Iranian pastor's wife sentenced to five years in prison for "Acting Against National Security"

Shamiram Isavi, the wife of Victor Bet Tamraz, who formerly led Iran's Assyrian Pentecostal Church, has been sentenced to five years in prison.

Mohabat News (29.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2EL3ujW> - "As far as we know, and based on Mrs. Isavi's own statements, no evidence has been presented in the case to show that she was engaged in spying or disturbing national security. She has denied all the charges," Kiarash Alipour, a spokesman for Article 18, a UK-based organization focusing on Christians in Iran, told the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) on January 25, 2018.

"Mrs. Isavi explained during the interrogation that when the Assyrian Pentecostal Church was shut down, she attended home churches and prayed with fellow Christians and discussed the Holy Book," added Alipour. "It's astonishing that a country's national security could be threatened by a gathering of Christian believers."

Isavi was charged with “acting against national security by organizing home churches, attending Christian seminars abroad and training Christian leaders in Iran for the purpose of espionage,” and found guilty by Judge Mashallah Ahmadzadeh of Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran on January 6, 2018.

Since March 2017, Judge Ahmadzadeh has sentenced 16 Christian converts in Iran to prison terms ranging from five to 15 years, according to Article 18.

Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Iran ratified in 1975, states that “everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.” However, the Islamic Republic views alternative belief systems, especially those seeking converts, as a threat to the prevailing Shia order.

Isavi and her husband were arrested in their home in Tehran on December 26, 2014, along with their son, Ramin Bet Tamraz, and 12 Christian converts.

On June 11, 2016, Ahmadzadeh sentenced Victor Bet Tamraz and Christian converts Hadi Asgari and Kavian Fallah Mohammadi to 10 years in prison each while convert Amin Afshar Naderi was issued a 15-year prison sentence. They are awaiting a decision on their appeal.

According to Article 13 of the Constitution: “Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.”

“No one in Iran is prosecuted for their beliefs unless they have committed a crime,” said Kazem Gharibabadi, the assistant for international affairs at the judiciary’s Islamic human rights division, on March 17, 2017.

However, Iran’s Christian community, particularly its convert community, faces systematic state persecution and discrimination due to its growth.

Despite President Hassan Rouhani’s pledges during his election campaign in 2013 that “All ethnicities, all religions, even religious minorities, must feel justice,” the targeting of Christian converts for state persecution and prosecution has continued unabated under his administration.

All Farsi-speaking Christian churches in Iran are currently banned. Only non-ethnic-Persians, such as Armenians and Assyrians, are allowed to practice their Christian faith.

“Christian converts can only attend home churches but they could face heavy sentences,” Alipour told CHRI.

100 Iranian Christians waiting to enter U.S. could be sent back to Iran

By Nina Shea

Washington Free Beacon (09.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2qMfz4U> - U.S. government action could send 100 mostly Christian Iranians stranded in Vienna back to Iran this week,

where their return during the harsh government crackdown on dissidents could target them for further persecution, human rights activists warn.

The deportation threat looms despite the Trump administration's and Congress's vocal support for protesters in Iran, who are waging the strongest nationwide uprising against the government in Tehran in eight years.

"These deportations, during a human-rights crackdown in Iran no less, could be a death sentence for these persecuted Christians and other minorities," Nina Shea, an international human rights lawyer who directs the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, told the Washington Free Beacon. "They would undermine the important statements against Iran's repression by President Trump, Vice President Pence and U.N. Ambassador [Nikki Haley]."

"The administration needs to act fast to stop this travesty," she said, noting that the U.S. government could give the refugees notices denying them entry to the U.S. as early as this week. This would leave the Austrians with little choice but to send them back to Iran.

Activists say the timing of the deportation threat is also particularly troublesome for the Trump administration, after the State Department last week designated Iran among 10 countries "of particular concern" for "systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom."

The Iranian Christian refugees traveled to Vienna in January 2017 under a 27-year-old U.S. law passed by Congress to help Jews escape persecution in the Soviet Union. Under a 2004 update of the law, known as the Lautenberg amendment, the State Department has helped tens of thousands of Iranian Jews, Christians, and Baha'is who were at risk in their home country to resettle in the United States.

During the end of the Obama administration, the State Department initially signed off on plans to resettle the latest group of mostly Iranian Christian refugees but then placed a hold on them toward the end of last year before Trump took office, according to Anna Buwalda, executive director of the Jubilee Campaign. The Jubilee Campaign is a nonprofit organization that advocates for religious minorities who suffer persecution in their home countries.

Buwalda says she and other human-rights activists don't know why the U.S. appears to be on the brink of denying them entry to the United States, and no one at the State Department or DHS has provided any answers.

"This is part of the mystery, and nobody's been able to receive any information to explain it," she said.

One-third of the refugees were set to resettle in California, where many of their relatives who have already gone through the refugee resettlement process are located, according to the activists.

The Department of Homeland Security, which has an office in Vienna, helped interview and vet the refugees, along with HIAS, the global Jewish nonprofit that works with the State Department on Lautenberg program refugee cases, Buwalda said.

HIAS referred a request for comment to its partner, the State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. Neither the State Department nor the DHS provided a response.

The refugees, most of them Armenians and Assyrians, have been waiting in Vienna for a year as U.S. courts have weighed in on the constitutionality of the travel ban, and recently were informed they must go back to Iran, according to Shea and Buwalda.

It is unclear if the Trump administration is behind the deportation threat or if Austria is becoming impatient with these cases remaining in limbo.

Human rights groups are urging the administration to take action and are worried the refugees and other priorities involving religious minorities in hotspots around the world are falling through the cracks as key Trump administration posts remain vacant a year into his presidency.

"The U.S. has broken its promise to Iranian religious minorities," Buwalda said. "They traveled to Vienna at the invitation of the United States, with the understanding that they would soon be reunited with their American families. Instead, the groups of refugees have been forced to wait there for more than a year with no explanation. They have no source of income, and many have spent down their life savings."

"The U.S. government must solve this situation quickly and humanely," she said.

One key post that would normally handle Lautenberg program issues remains vacant. Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback's nomination to the State Department post of ambassador at large for religious freedom is in limbo after Democrats placed a hold on it late last year and blocked the Senate from approving him.

The White House re-nominated Brownback on Monday but has not publicly disclosed whether it intends to expend the political capital to lean on the Senate to quickly confirm him. Senate GOP leaders would have to devote at least three days of precious floor time to hold a floor vote on the nomination if Democrats continue to oppose him instead of passing him quickly by unanimous consent.

The White House did not respond to an inquiry into Brownback's nomination.

Catholic and other Christian leaders have praised the Trump administration's rhetoric on the issue. They point to the administration's National Security Strategy report, unveiled in late December, and its pledge to "protect religious minorities" abroad.

Pence in October received a standing ovation at a dinner devoted to religious freedom issue when he pledged that "help is on the way" to religious minority communities in Iraq struggling to recover from Islamic State genocide.

However, Trump also has yet to appoint a special adviser for international religious freedom at the White House's National Security Council and has kept a special envoy for religious freedom post downgraded in power, as it was during the Obama administration.

The faith office at USAID also remains without a leader.

Continued closure of the Baha'i businesses: 90 locations in Kerman, Sistan, and Baluchistan and East Azerbaijan

Iran Press Watch (02.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2Ffob7q> - The number of Baha'i-owned business under forced closure and seal by authorities in Kerman, Sistan, and Baluchistan and East Azerbaijan has reached 90. This includes the recent closure of 16 Baha'i shops in Tabriz, as well as the remained seal of previously-closed units.

According to the HRANA news agency, the human rights activist news agency in Iran, during the past two weeks 16 Baha'i commercial units were sealed in Tabriz, East Azerbaijan province:

- Shahriar Khodapanah (eyeglasses distribution)
- Touraj Misaghi (eyeglasses)
- Kambiz Misaghi (eyeglasses)
- Parham Saberi (clothing store)
- Shiva Isa Khani (hair salon)
- Payam Zafaryab (eyeglasses)
- Behnam Aghabalai (appliance vendor)
- Mohammad Hokmran (appliance vendor)
- Anees Hokmran (eyeglasses repair)
- Farhad Nabati (eyeglasses)
- Behrouz Nourdel (eyeglasses)
- Enayat Molaei (photography)
- Behnam Shafiei (cosmetics store)
- Alireza Agha Balayi (coil winding)
- Navid Ighani (eyeglasses)
- Behrouz Isa Khani (household appliance vendor)
- It is reported that 17 shops in Kerman and 25 shops in Rafsanjan have remained sealed for about 32 months, despite all the follow-up and complaints by Baha'i citizens to the Administrative Justice Court.

The interruption of business of Baha'i citizens of Kerman province occurred in retaliation for their shop closure in observance of a religious holiday.

Baha'i-owned businesses in Sistan and Baluchistan Province which were closed and sealed by security forces on October 30, 2017, also remain sealed.

Additionally, 18 stores in Zahedan, four shops in Iranshahr, three shops in Saravan and eight shops in Chabahar have been closed and sealed.

Previous reports from HRANA regarding closure of the Baha'i-owned businesses of Sistan and Baluchistan list the following:

- Habib Tawhidi (Tohid Eyeglasses),
- Ahmad Ali Shokati (Eshragh Eyeglasses),
- Bright Light (Roshan Residential Glass),
- Behrooz Gholam Razaei (Building Sanitation Supply),
- Bijan Gholam Razaei (Parto Electric),
- Bahador Kamjou (Jupiter Eyeglasses),
- Andalib Todei (Dehkadeh Jahani Computer Service), and
- Azarakhsh barghi (Nikan stationary)
- While this report focuses on three provinces, forced closure of Baha'i-owned business has been occurring throughout the country.

In many cases, the details of the interrogations and the reasons for the forced business closure are not provided by authorities. However, based on the pattern, particularly in recent years, suppression of the Baha'i Community's ability to engage economic activity and the resultant economic insecurity has been a leverage used by security and Intelligence agencies to apply pressure the followers of this religious minority.

According to Article 28, paragraph Beh (ب) of the trade union law, business owners may close their shops for up to 15 days a year, without notice to the union. Despite this, law enforcement and security agencies continue to routinely forcibly close and seal the shops of Baha'is during closure for observance of Baha'i holidays.

Shahindokht Molaverdi, the Special Assistant to the President on Civil Rights Issues, said in a statement to the media on December 3, 2017, " As regards to the closure of commercial premises and the denial of Baha'i activities, there have been queries from the President's Legal Assistant, and we are discussing this through legislation in order to find a solution to the issue." In the meantime, forced closure of the Baha'is' businesses continues in Iran
