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Third member of Yaran completes 10 year sentence

Baha'I World News Service (05.12.2017) - <http://news.bahai.org/story/1225/> - Behrooz Tavakkoli, one of the seven members of the former leadership group of the Baha'is in Iran who were imprisoned due to religious beliefs, has completed his unjust 10-year prison sentence. Mr. Tavakkoli is the third member of the Yaran to leave prison.

Mr. Tavakkoli, 66, was part of the ad-hoc group known as "the Yaran," or the Friends, which tended to the basic spiritual and material needs of the Iranian Baha'i community and was formed with the full knowledge and approval of authorities there after formal Baha'i institutions were declared illegal in Iran in the 1980s. He and five other members of the group were arrested in May 2008 after an early morning raid on their homes. Another member, Mahvash Sabet, was arrested two months earlier, in March 2008.

Aside from Mr. Tavakkoli, [Mahvash Sabet](#) and [Fariba Kamalabadi](#) have also been released from prison. The four remaining members of the Yaran who are expected to complete their sentences in the coming months include Jamaloddin Khanjani, 84; Afif Naeimi, 56; Saeid Rezai, 60; and Vahid Tizfahm, 44.

Mr. Tavakkoli experienced discrimination for being a Baha'i throughout his life, which mirrors the situation for the Baha'i community in Iran in the present day. After studying psychology and serving in the army as a lieutenant, he faithfully cared for the physically and mentally disabled as a government social worker, yet was expelled in the early 1980s because he was a Baha'i. Today, not only are Baha'is excluded from employment in the public sector as well as various professions in the private sector, Baha'i-owned shops and businesses are regularly sealed by the authorities after they are temporarily closed to observe Baha'i Holy Days. In the last few years alone, hundreds of such businesses have been sealed, depriving scores of families of an income.

Prior to his current imprisonment, he also experienced intermittent detainment and harassment and, in 2005, was jailed for four months without charge, spending most of the time in solitary confinement. In recent months, arrests of Baha'is have been intensifying in cities such as Kermanshah, Birjand, and Rasht, and today, approximately one-hundred Baha'is are held in prisons across Iran solely because of their religious beliefs.

Iran upholds 10-year sentence of Christian convert who was arrested for 'missionary activities'

By Jardina Malado

The Christian Times (27.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2AvTn3q> - An Iranian court has upheld the 10-year prison sentence of a Christian convert who was arrested last year for engaging in "missionary activities" and "actions against national security."

Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh, a convert from a Muslim background, was arrested in June 2016 along with three Azerbaijanis after security agents raided a wedding party they attended in Tehran.

World Watch Monitor reported that the three Azerbaijanis — Eldar Gurbanov, Yusif Farhadov and Bahram Nasibov — were also sentenced to 10 years in prison, but they were allowed to leave Iran in November last year. The men had reportedly spent four months in prison before they were released on bail.

Mervyn Thomas, chief executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), described the charges against the men at the time as "unwarranted and unjustified."

"We are deeply concerned for Mr Gol-Tapeh in particular, who [being in Iran] is likely to bear the brunt of a sentence that was clearly issued on a punitive rather than on a legal basis," he said.

CSW reported that the judge handed down the sentences during a hearing held on May 23, 2017, but the men did not hear about the verdict until June 12.

The three Azerbaijanis are unlikely to be forced to return, despite the failure of their representatives to overturn their verdicts during the Nov. 12 hearing.

The news of their sentencing in May came during the same week that a court handed down lengthy jail sentences to four other Iranian Christians for offenses related to evangelism and acting "against national security."

World Watch Monitor reported in July that four Christians, including a pastor, had received jail sentences ranging from 10 to 15 years.

Kaviyan Fallah-Mohammadi, Hadi Asgari and Amin Afshar-Naderi were sentenced to 10 years in prison alongside their pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz for "conducting evangelism" and "illegal house-church activities." Naderi got another five-year prison sentence, in addition to his 10-year sentence, for "insulting the sacred."

According to CSW, the maximum sentence issued in previous cases against Christians was five years, and in some cases when the defendants received two five-year sentences, the jail terms were reduced to half on appeal.

At least 21 Christians have been sentenced to long prison terms in Iran since May, according to advocacy group Article 18.

"Iran continues to violate international law on freedom of religion or belief," the group remarked.

"The growing community of Christian converts are not permitted to attend recognised churches and have to gather for worship in secret 'house churches' and risk arrest and imprisonment. In 2016 over 193 Christian were arrested for attending these prayer meetings and Bible studies in 'house churches,'" it continued.

Six more Baha'is sentenced to prison in Iran

Radio Farda (22.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2jeRjBA> - Six Iranian citizens accused of acting against national security for following the Baha'i faith have been sentenced to a combined total of 18 years' imprisonment, a representative of the Baha'i International Community (BIC) told Radio Farda.

All six Baha'is, residents of the impoverished Sistan and Baluchestan Province in southeastern Iran, were tried at a Revolutionary Court in Zahedan, the capital of the province.

In Iran, Baha'is have long been victim to systematic discrimination and persecution for their faith.

"We cannot yet confirm the reports, but we know that three of these Baha'is -- Houshang Mokhtari, Bijan Eslami, and Ali Anvari -- were detained three or four months ago and later released on bail. Now, sadly, we have heard they have all been sentenced to prison," BIC spokesman Padiede Sabeti told Radio Farda.

Sabeti, based in London, said pressure on Baha'is in the provinces of Sistan and Baluchestan, Kerman, Kermanshah, and Hormozgan has intensified in recent months.

"Last month in Kerman, nine Baha'is were detained but released after being subjected to persecution. Based on social media reports, many of the detainees' properties were confiscated," she said.

Along with those suspected of opposing the ruling system in Iran, Bahai'is are often charged with actions against national security.

"The term is quite vague," Sabeti said. "Many international institutions defending human rights have repeatedly asked [Iran] to deliver a clear definition of the term. Nevertheless, they have received no response."

The trial of the six Baha'is was held some time ago, and their sentences were issued on the basis of a summons handed down on November 16 by the Zahedan court. Each was sentenced to three years, according to the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA).

The group categorically rejected the charges of acting against national security, saying they are simply citizens persecuted for their religious beliefs.

According to HRANA, the convicted Baha'is plan to appeal their sentences within the next 20 days.

Meanwhile, many Baha'i businesses have been sealed off by Iranian security officers.

The action was in apparent reprisal for owners closing their businesses in observance of the recent Baha'i holidays celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Baha'u'llah (the prophet of the Baha'i faith), which is of particular importance to the worldwide Baha'i community.

UN condemns Iran's human rights violations for 30th time

Baha'I World News Service (14.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2zJ2WZb> - A committee of the United Nations General Assembly today condemned Iran for its continuing violations of human rights, the 30th such resolution since 1985.

By a vote of 83 to 30 with 68 abstentions, the Third Committee of the General Assembly approved a five-page resolution expressing concern over illegal practices ranging from torture, poor prison conditions, arbitrary detention, and curbs on freedom of religion or belief to state-endorsed discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities as well as women.

The resolution (<http://undocs.org/A/C.3/72/L.41>) expressed specific concern over Iran's treatment of members of the Baha'i Faith, the country's largest non-Muslim religious minority. It highlighted the economic and educational discrimination against them and called on Iran to release the more than 90 Baha'is who are unjustly held in Iranian prisons.

"We welcome this resolution and its strong condemnation of Iran's ongoing human rights violations," said Bani Dugal, the Principal Representative of the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations.

"Despite the Iranian government shifting its strategy of oppression and supporting a vigorous public relations campaign to deny the existence of such violations, the resolution today shows that other governments have not been deceived and that Iran's failure to heed international law remains high on the international agenda," said Ms. Dugal.

The resolution follows a strongly worded document from the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Asma Jahangir. Her 23-page report (<http://bit.ly/2ASQh6v>), released earlier this session, catalogued a broad range of rights violations by Iran.

Ms. Jahangir cited “serious human rights challenges” including “the arbitrary detention and prosecution of individuals for their legitimate exercise of a broad range of rights; the persecution of human rights defenders, journalists, students, trade union leaders, and artists; a high level of executions, including of juvenile offenders; the use of torture and ill-treatment; widespread violations of the right to a fair trial and due process of law, especially before revolutionary courts; and a high level of discrimination against women and religious and ethnic minorities.”

She also highlighted the situation of Iranian Baha’is, noting that “members of the Baha’i community have continued to suffer multiple violations of their human rights.”

Ms. Jahangir in particular called attention to the case of Farhang Amir (<http://news.bahai.org/story/1182/>) a Baha’i who was stabbed to death in September 2016 and whose confessed killers were swiftly released on bail.

“Despite the fact that they have been documented for years, these violations continue unabated and with full impunity, as shown by the release of the murderer of a Bahá’í,” she said, referring to Mr. Amiri.

Ms. Jahangir’s report also noted that “thousands of Baha’is have been expelled from their jobs, with their pensions having been terminated, and have been banned from employment in the public sector.

“Companies are pressured to dismiss Baha’i employees, banks are forced to block the accounts of Baha’i clients, and Baha’i business licenses are either not issued, not extended, or deliberately delayed.”

For more information, go to www.bic.org

Freedom for prominent Baha’i Fariba Kamalabadi

By Saleem Vaillancourt

Iran Wire (31.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2gSbpRk> - Fariba Kamalabadi, one of seven former members of an ad hoc leadership group for the Baha’is in Iran, was released from Evin Prison today after completing a 10-year prison sentence. Her release follows that of Mahvash Sabet, a teacher, poet and also a former member of the group, the Yaran (or friends), who left Evin on 19 September. Five other members of the group remain in jail.

Kamalabadi’s story was highlighted in May 2016 when, during a brief furlough from prison, she was visited by her former cellmate Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani, daughter of former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Photos of Faezeh’s visit, given her high profile as a pro-reform politician and daughter of a former president, spread across social media and Iranian satellite news. Her visit, along with that of the prominent human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, brought Kamalabadi’s situation and those of her colleagues to wider attention in Iran.

Trained as a developmental psychologist at the Baha’i Institute for Higher Education, an underground university established to educate young Baha’is who are officially barred from Iranian universities, Kamalabadi is also a mother of three, and was initially arrested in 2008 on a range of charges that her lawyer, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, said were “baseless.” The charges included espionage, colluding with foreign governments, and “spreading corruption on earth.” All seven of members of the Yaran

were held for months without being informed of their charges, seeing their lawyers, or appearing before a judge.

Kamalabadi and her colleagues were eventually convicted simply for their work in assisting the Baha'i community in Iran. Their original 20-year sentences were later reduced to 10 years.

Ninety-seven Baha'is are currently in jail in Iran because of their religious beliefs and Baha'i-owned businesses were recently sealed by the authorities because their owners chose to close them on a Baha'i holy day.

No information on the condition of the Christian convert Mohammad Ali Torabi in Iran

After 2 weeks from his arrest, despite the assurances of the security forces that he would be released in 5 days, there is no information of the whereabouts and the condition of Mohammad Ali Torabi. Moreover, the family of this newly converted Christian, due to security fears, has failed to retain a lawyer in the city of Dezful.

Mohabat News (23.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2xjtqqV> - After 2 weeks from the arrest of Mohammad Ali Torabi, one of the newly converted Christians in the South Western city of Dezful, his family has failed to locate his whereabouts and to be informed of the charges against him from the judicial authorities.

Mohammad Ali Torabi, 39 years old, was arrested on Tuesday October 10, 2017 at his work place in the city of Dezful by the security forces and taken to an undisclosed location belonging to the Ministry of Information of the city of Ahwaz.

Although his exact whereabouts is unknown, it is assumed that he is being kept in an old military barrack located in an area known as "Chahar Shir", which connects to the local airport facility. This facility belongs to the intelligence forces of the Sepah and it is said that other detainees have been taken to the solitary cells in this facility.

Informed sources have reported that Mr. Torabi had been promised that he would be released after 5 days once his interrogation is over, but his detention has been extended for unknown reasons.

Currently, after 2 weeks of detention, he was given permission once to contact his family.

Mr. Torabi's family were unable to find a lawyer in the city of Dezful. No lawyer was willing to accept his case. Therefore his family had to travel to Ahwaz, the Capital of the province in order to retain a lawyer for Mr. Torabi.

The family of Mr. Torabi took the lawyer's acceptance letter to the office of the Ministry of Information last Thursday, but they were told to return on Saturday for formal notification of the government about his legal representation.

Sources close to Mr. Torabi's family say that his arrest are due to his activities in promoting Christianity.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has banned Farsi speaking churches from operating in Iran since 2012. As a result, newly converted Christians in Iran are forced into house-churches, which are illegal in Iran.

From the point of view of the government and other security establishments these gatherings are considered illegal and often they are subjected to home invasions by the security forces. The leaders and members of these house churches are often arrested and charged with inciting anti-government and "national security" activities such as the establishment of house churches and the promotion of Christianity.

Recently, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of Israel in one of his speeches given to the Christian media accused Iran of gross violation of the human rights of Christians in Iran. Mr. Netanyahu accused some of the world leaders of compromise and intentional negligence of this matter for the sake of better relations with the leaders of Iran. He mentioned the difficult condition of the Christian minority in Iran and added that Christians in Iran are persecuted mercilessly. Pastors are imprisoned without cause and Iranian Christians are brutally tortured and persecuted for their religious beliefs.

Another Christian convert arrested in south-western Iran

Iranian security authorities summoned a Christian convert in the south-western city of Dezful and arrested him in the Ministry of Intelligence office.

Mohabat News (23.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2y1GL3a> - Another member of the Payam-e Aramesh (Message of Peace) house church in Dezful, Abdol-Ali Pourmand (Elyas) was arrested on October 19, 2017 and transferred to Ahwaz.

Knowledgeable sources told Mohabat News that the security authorities raided Mr. Pourmand's house when he was working on his farm. Plain-clothes security authorities searched his house thoroughly in his absence and confiscated a few Bibles and Christian CDs.

Later, Mr. Pourmand received a call from the Ministry of Intelligence. He was summoned to their office in Dezful. He went to the ministry's office and was arrested on the spot.

Three days after his arrest, on October 21, 2017, Mr. Pourmand was allowed to make a short phone call to his family. During the call he told his family that he is told he will not be held there for long.

Mr. Pourmand has been married for two months and is currently separated from his new bride.

Three other Christians have been arrested in Dezful recently. Mohabat News has obtained confirmed reports of them being beaten in prison and threatened that if they don't renounce their faith in Christ and turn away from their Christian faith they will be forced to leave the country or be beaten to death.

Persecution of Christians in the south-western province of Khuzestan has intensified in the last several weeks, especially in the city of Dezful.

Another member of the Payam-e Aramesh (Message of Peace) house church, Mohammad Ali Torabi, also known as Davoud, had also been arrested at his work place on October 10, 2017. He was transferred to Ahwaz immediately after his arrest. His family was also told that he will be released soon, but he has not yet been released.

The Islamic regime of Iran has been using different methods, including harassment, terror, arrest and heavy sentences to persecute Christians over the last three and a half decades, especially Farsi speaking Christians in the country. Time and time again International Human Rights and Religious

Watchdog organizations have condemned the Islamic regime for its mistreatment of Christians, but they deny all reports of Christian persecution. Despite Iranian government's extensive programs for spreading Shi'ite Islam and punishing conversion to other religions by death, embrace of Christianity among Iranians citizens has been on the rise across the country.

Recently arrested Christian convert couple still held in uncertainty

Mohabat News (04.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2xtLaGD> - The status of converted Christians "Mehrdad Hushmand" and "Sara Nemati" who were called to the information office of Sepah (Iranian Revolutionary Guard) forces on September 11, 2017, where they were interrogated by the security officers, is still unknown.

The informed sources have reported that these converted Christian couple are accused of participating in a Christian funeral in Behesht Zahra cemetery.

These two individuals prayed for one of their friends in a Christian funeral on September 10, 2017. Few unknown individuals had been watching Mr. Hushmand and Mrs. Nemati for some time and approached this couple in the ceremony and asked for Mr. Hushmand's ID and asked him to be present himself in the information office of Sepah the next day.

The following day, Mehrdad Hushmand accompanied by his wife, Sara Nemati attended the office and they were interrogated for several hours and then in all likelihood sent to the notorious Evin prison in Tehran.

Since then, only Sara Nemati was given the permission to call her family once.

"It has been reported that the information officers have threatened Mrs. Nemati that her husband would be charged with "corruption". They have also recommended to her that "it would be a great service to yourself if you got divorced!"

As this converted Christian couple attended a Christian funeral where the deceased was not a Christian, it has been suggested that they had been identified and under observation by the Sepah officers.

There has been no news of the reasons for their captivity, their health status, or their location since their arrest.

The security officials of Islamic Republic are trying to stop the promotion and growth of Christianity inside the country by very harsh controls over Christian groups. Pursuits, tortures, intimidations, arrests, and heavy charges in the courts for Christians, especially for the Persian speaking converts, have been going on for many years by the official and nonofficial agents of the government. Nevertheless they have been singled out and protested by other religious organizations and human right activists all over the world.

Tehran's Sunnis still waiting for their own mosque

By Zahra Alipour

Al-Monitor (21.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2wNXUfP> - "Mr. Rouhani! No need to give them positions in your administration — just allow them to have a mosque to perform the Eid al-Adha prayer."

Reformist parliamentarian Mahmoud Sadeghi addressed these words to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in a Twitter post from Sept. 1, while communal prayers marking the major Islamic holiday of Eid al-Adha were being performed all over the country. Sadeghi attached an image to the Twitter post showing Sunni worshipers standing in a long line on a street in Tehran's Sadeghiyeh district. A few days later, Hojjat Nazari, a newly-elected member of Tehran's City Council, said in a speech, "Certainly, Sunni citizens are also entitled to their own places of worship in Tehran. The city management is asked to follow up on this issue."

The issue of building a mosque for the Sunni residents of Tehran has long been a topic of discussion among Sunni elites, members of parliament and civil rights activists. However, the Iranian government insists that Tehran already has Sunni mosques. On Aug. 5, 2015, the website of the Mosques Affairs Regulating Authority reported that Tehran has nine Sunni mosques. According to prominent Sunni figures, however, these are merely prayer rooms.

In an interview with Al-Monitor, former Sunni parliamentarian Jalal Jalalizadeh noted that Tehran's Sunni residents do not have a place that can be called a mosque and that the prayer spaces available to Sunnis are "rented houses," meaning that the property owners can evict them "at any given moment." He added, "Mosques, on the other hand, have a particular identity and a set location. One cannot refer to a private house that does not have [a relevant] identity as a mosque. When we don't have the right to broadcast a call to prayer or have a sign, then we have a prayer room and not a mosque."

Even these prayer rooms have faced restrictions and limitations in recent years, especially during Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr. On Jan. 9, 2015, while the International Islamic Unity Conference was taking place in Tehran, Saham News reported that law enforcement officers had prevented Sunni communal Friday prayers from being held in Tehran. The prayers were scheduled to be led in the Sunni prayer room in the western district of Pounak, under the leadership of Abdul Hamid Ismail Zahi — a famous Sunni figure in Iran who is better known as Molavi Abdul Hamid.

After this incident, the prayer room in Pounak was closed down temporarily by law enforcement officers. On Jan. 18, 2015, ars News Agency, which has close ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, reported that the "real reason" the Pounak site was closed down was that it was both illegal and also used as "a means of recruiting foreign citizens."

On Jan. 29, 2015, the Tehran municipality demolished the Pounak prayer room with the backing of law enforcement. Sunni Online, a website dedicated to the affairs of Iran's Sunni community, reported, "Security forces went to the prayer room in Pounak and, after confiscating the cellphone of the Friday prayer leader of this prayer room, Abdullah Musazadeh, and inspecting his private residence, dozens of municipality employees started to demolish the building."

Aside from parliamentarians and Sunni prayer leaders who condemned the demolition, the Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought also issued a statement denouncing it, saying, "The catastrophic incident of demolishing the prayer room of our Sunni brothers in Pounak district of Tehran has broken the hearts of all those who are concerned about the unity of the Islamic ummah, regardless of their own religious tendencies, and requires much reflection."

Government officials did not react to these objections, and only a few Principlist media outlets close to the Iranian state reported on the issue. For example, on Aug. 6, 2015, Mashregh, which is linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, reported that certain

parts of the building housing the Pounak prayer room were demolished because violations and change in usage were happening in the structure: "The management of this prayer room had built stairs going from the underground to the ground floor to make the building look like a mosque. ... This means that a 'housing unit' had been converted to a 'communal mosque.'"

Jalalizadeh, the former Sunni parliamentarian, told Al-Monitor that, in recent years, the right to build a structural, purpose-built mosque in Tehran has become one of the main demands of Iran's Sunni community. Nonetheless, he believes that "there is no intention of allowing the Sunni community to build mosques." He added, "Ordinary people have no problem with Sunnis and Sunnis building their own mosques. Only the government, and in fact only certain factions of it, are opposed to this."

In response to the Pounak site being demolished, Abdul Hamid wrote two separate letters — one addressed to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the other to President Rouhani. In his letter addressed to the supreme leader, Abdul Hamid noted that Sunni residents of Tehran are not allowed to have a mosque of their own and remarked, "At a time like this, when extremism, excommunication, violence and division are becoming widespread and the Islamic world requires tranquility and tolerance, Sunni brothers and sisters did not expect such a treatment."

Abdul Hamid's letters went unanswered at the time. In an interview with BBC Persian on Oct. 30, 2016, he mentioned this and said, "They do not answer [the letters] since there is no convincing answer. According to the constitution [of Iran], people enjoy certain rights, but then there is a narrow-mindedness that prevents people from enjoying their full rights."

On Aug. 6, 2017, however, Iranian media outlets published an image of Abdul Hamid's most recent letter to the supreme leader and Khamenei's answer. In his Aug. 2 letter, Abdul Hamid had emphasized "the importance of greater religious freedom and especially the freedom to conduct daily prayers and Friday prayers in major cities such as Tehran" for members of the Sunni community.

Khamenei's answer, written by his chief of staff, Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, on Aug. 12, read: "All elements of the Islamic Republic are required, in accordance with the religious teachings and the constitution, to refrain from allowing any discrimination and inequality among Iranians regardless of their religion, ethnicity or race."

Jalalizadeh hopes that the Islamic Republic will change its behavior toward Iranian Sunnis, not only when it comes to building mosques, but in all dimensions of citizens' rights. He told Al-Monitor, "Why should citizens of a country be deprived of building a place of worship in the capital city of that country? Even in Sunni-dominated areas where the Shiite residents number less than a hundred families, there are still Shiite mosques and hosseiniyehs [Shiite worship halls]. Having a place of worship, be it a temple, mosque or church, is the right of every citizen, and it is against the law and human rights to take this right away. The only person who can solve this problem is Ayatollah Khamenei." He added, "Nothing is impossible. I believe that there will come a time when Sunnis can have their own mosques in Tehran."

Baha'i leader released from prison in Iran after 10 years; six other Baha'i leaders remain behind bars

Mahvash Sabet, one of the Baha'i Seven prisoners for whose release HRWF campaigned, is finally free, but state-led persecution of the Baha'i community continues.

Center for Human Rights in Iran (18.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2hckIyX> - The Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) welcomes the release of the Baha'i leader, Mahvash Sabet, who was unjustly imprisoned in Iran for 10 years on the sole basis of her religion. CHRI calls for the immediate release of the six other Baha'i leaders, who have all been imprisoned in Iran since 2008, and an end to the state-led persecution of the Baha'i community.

"All seven of these individuals, including Mahvash, were unjustly imprisoned to begin with, and should not have spent one day in prison, let alone 10 years," said Hadi Ghaemi, CHRI's executive director.

"The state's persecution of the Baha'i community in Iran is relentless and in violation of international and Iranian law," said Ghaemi.

The Baha'i community is one of the most persecuted religious minorities in Iran. Members of the faith are forbidden to publicly practice their religion, are routinely denied employment and education, suffer the confiscation of their property and the closing of their businesses, and its leaders are imprisoned. There are currently some 90 members of the Baha'i faith in prison in Iran due to the practice of their religion.

May 15, 2017, marked the ninth anniversary of the imprisonment of seven leaders of Iran's Baha'i community — Jamaloddin Khanjani, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Saeid Rezaie, Fariba Kamalabadi, Vahid Tizfahm, Afif Naeimi, and Mahvash Sabet. The "Baha'i 7" were each sentenced to 20 years in prison on sham national security-related charges before their sentences were reduced to 10 years upon appeal.

The United Nations has condemned Iran's persecution of its Baha'i community. According to Article 25 of the Charter on Citizens' Rights, which Iranian president Rouhani signed in December 2016, "Citizens have freedom of thought. Inquisition is prohibited, and no one can be persecuted merely for his or her beliefs." However, Baha'i leaders have noted that the persecution of the Baha'i community has actually increased during the Rouhani administration.

Sunni Arabs beaten and arrested in Iran for praying in public

Center for Human Rights in Iran (17.08.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2vTIEe5> - Thirteen Sunni Arabs have been beaten by security and plainclothes agents and arrested for publicly praying in Ahvaz, the capital of Iran's Khuzestan Province, the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) has learned.

The men, all between the ages of 20 and 27, were taken into custody on August 11, 2017 for holding a traditional Sunni group prayer, Arab ethnic rights activist Karim Dahimi told CHRI on August 15.

"They were on an excursion in the Karkheh area west of the city of Shush," said Dahimi. "At noon, they held a group prayer based on Sunni rituals out in the open in public view. Suddenly the security forces and plainclothes agents attacked and beat them with batons and took them all away."

"The families first went to the Intelligence Ministry's office in Shush, but were told the detainees had been transferred to the ministry's branch in Ahvaz," added Dahimi. "But the authorities in Ahvaz are claiming to have no information either."

The detainees are: Riyaz Zoheiri, Javad Hashemi, Hossein Hiavi al-Haei, Hassan Dalfi, Heidar Sari Savari, Milad Afravi, Yousef Khasarji, Yaser Silavi, Sajjad al-Hai Nasiri, Ali Bavi, Shaker Sharifi, Abbas Sharifi and Ahmad Heidari.

Khuzestan Province is home to Iran's largest ethnic Arab population, at an estimated 2.5-5 million. The Islamic Republic views any alternative belief system, especially those seeking converts, as a threat to the prevailing Shia order.

In June 2017, security forces arrested 13 people, including Arab ethnic rights activists and poets, in Ahvaz and blocked an annual demonstration in defense of Arab ethnic rights in Iran.

Islamic clerics warn against spread of Christianity in the most Islamic city in Iran

Qom, arguably the most Islamic city in Iran, is a socially and religiously conflicted city where house churches are hunted down and conversion to Christianity is viewed as an action against national security.



Mohabat News (11.08.2017) - <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=3660> - Christianity has been growing at an exponential rate in the last couple of decades in Iran, causing the Islamic government a great deal of concern. In a most recent expression of their distress, one of the high profile Islamic seminary officials, Ayatollah Alavi Boroujerdi, stated "accurate reports indicate that the youth are becoming Christians in Qom and attending house churches".

However, this is not a new development. Earlier reports had also shown a surprising rise in the number of Iranians turning away from Islam and converting to Christianity.

One of the most senior Islamic Shi'ite clerics who has repeatedly expressed his concern over the spread of Christianity among the youth in the country is Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi. He, as well as most of his colleagues blame the foreign influence for the conversion of young Iranians to Christianity. The question that comes up however, is that what could be the real cause for Iranian youths' rejection of Islam and its principles,

despite the serious risks involved with conversion to Christianity in an Islamic country such as Iran?

This high rate of conversion of Iranian youth to Christianity is in spite of rigorous Islamic indoctrination of the youth in their families and educational system. The Islamic government of Iran dedicates massive budgets to the support of Islamic organizations that promote Islam among the youth within and without Iran's borders. Such effort to attract Iranian youth is much more noticeable in Islamic cities such as Mashhad and Qom. Regardless of such efforts, Iranian youth seem to become increasingly distant from Islam, which is a cause of great concern for the Iranian Islamic government.

Last year, after Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi expressed his deepest concern over the popularity of Christianity in the suburbs of Mashhad, the city's religious and political officials immediately sent a vast number of Islamic teachers and preachers to Mashhad's suburbs in order to turn the youth away from Christianity. The next phase in dealing with this matter was to crack down on the youth who refused to turn back following the efforts of Islamic teachers and preachers. The Iranian law enforcement and intelligence ministry got involved and began waves of arrests and harassment of Christian converts, facing them with long term prison sentences and heavy bails for their temporary release.

Another Iranian Ayatollah, Wahid Khorasani expressed concerns over the spread of Christianity in the country. He said he had received reports about the exponential increase in popularity of Christianity amongst the youth in the Islamic city of Qom. He criticized government authorities "for their negligence in preparing counteracting strategies to stop the spread of Christianity. In his remarks eight years ago, he had encouraged the government authorities to develop a coherent strategy to eradicate

Another Ayatollah, based in Tabriz, stated he had received reports that at one time, 600 residents of one of the cities in Khorasan province had converted to Christianity.

These harsh remarks years ago, led to a rigorous crackdown campaign against the Iranian Christian community, resulting in arrests, imprisonments and disbanding of a number of house church gatherings.

– Failure of Islamic Authorities' Efforts to Stop the Spread of Christianity

The Iranian Islamic government implemented a two-fold plan to stop the spread of Christianity in the country, and it has failed on both fronts.

The first front was the allocation of millions of dollars for Islamic propaganda across the country, which over the years has proven to be ineffective as Iranian youth seem to be distancing themselves from the Islamic lifestyle the Iranian government wishes to spread.

The second front, in which the Iranian government's Islamic agenda has failed is their crackdown campaign on newly converted Christians in order to plant fear in those who are interested in learning more about Christianity and possibly becoming Christians themselves. This failure is obvious as Iranian Islamic authorities continue to express their concern over the rapid growth of Christianity in the country.

In recent years many Iranian Christian converts have been arrested. However, the rate of growth of house churches in the country has been exponential, despite a mass exodus of Iranian Christians.

In this regard, Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani, one of the high profile Iranian Islamic figures, wrote in a paper a few years ago, "There was a time when Islamic institutions in Qom were sufficient to counter the spread of Christianity in our city. However, today we do not

have any Islamic institution in Qom that can stop Christian evangelism effectively". In his remarks he also referred to the son of one of the Islamic clerics as having become a Christian.

In a report released seven years ago, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards identified 200 house churches in the Islamic city of Mashhad. Other reports indicate this number has grown significantly ever since. Mashhad is known as the Islamic capital of Iran and the Shi'ite Muslim world. Other cities having a record number of house churches in Iran include Rasht, Tehran and Karaj.

In Tehran there are many house churches that meet on a regular basis. One of Tehran's Imams said in an interview, "today Christians present their gospel to our youth in the most appealing way. They gather in many neighbourhoods across the city, including Bani Hashem neighbourhood (in Tehran) where tens of homes have been turned into house churches which evangelize their neighbours".

One of the visible effects of the Iranian government's crackdown on Christians has been the closure of numerous churches, including the Central Assemblies of God (AOG) church and Janat Abad church in Tehran and the AOG church in Ahwaz. Additionally, Christian converts were banned from entering official churches and Farsi services were forced to cancel permanently across the country in all churches. Publication of anything related to Christianity or any material referring to Christianity was also restricted and books about Christianity already in the market were confiscated./

Iranian Christian Maryam Naghash Zargaran released after four years in prison



Maryam Naghash Zargaran spent four years in prison and undertook several hunger strikes to protest against being denied medical care.

World Watch Monitor (02.08.2017) - [Ahttp://bit.ly/2tZozB2](http://bit.ly/2tZozB2) - After four years' imprisonment for "violating national security", Iranian Christian Maryam Naghash Zargaran was released from Tehran's Evin prison last night (1 August).

She was due to be released four days earlier, on 28 July, but, as [Mohabat News reported](#), this was delayed without explanation.

Naghash Zargaran, 39, a convert from Islam, was first questioned by intelligence officers in January 2010 because of her work with underground churches, or “house churches”.

In January 2013, she was arrested alongside Iranian-American pastor [Saeed Abedini](#) in connection with their work at an orphanage and both were sentenced a few months later. (Abedini was [released](#) in January 2016, following pressure from the US government.)

According to Mohabat News, quoting part of Naghash Zargaran’s conviction letter, the court sentenced her to four years’ imprisonment for acts that were “in line with England and Occupied Palestine’s [Israel’s] anti-security agenda to spread Christianity in Iran in order to pervert Iranian society from Islam”.

While in prison she was harassed and [repeatedly denied medical treatment](#) for longstanding medical issues. To protest against this, she undertook a number of hunger strikes. On a handful of occasions she was allowed to leave prison temporarily to receive treatment, but each time forced to return before it could be completed. She then had her [sentence extended by six weeks](#) to make up for the time she had spent outside prison.

Last year her family said that prison conditions had traumatised her and left her suffering with depression. Amnesty International referenced her case when it [accused Iran of “cruel” denial of medical care](#) in its prisons.

Naghash Zargaran underwent heart surgery ten years ago and needs regular medical check-ups. She has also been diagnosed with lumbar disc disease, arthritis and osteoporosis. The stressful conditions in prison exacerbated her congenital heart condition, reported to be Atrial Septal Defect (also known as a “hole in the heart”), which can reduce the blood’s oxygen levels.

Mansour Borji, from advocacy group Article 18, told World Watch Monitor her “unjust detention despite severe health issues is clear evidence of Iran’s lack of respect for religious freedom”.

“Part of this suppression is reflected in the increased number of arrests, but also smear campaigns against religious minorities, especially Christians,” he added.

In the past few months, a dozen Christians – mainly converts from a Muslim background – have been [sentenced to lengthy prison terms of ten years or more](#), leading two imprisoned Christians to undertake hunger strikes of their own. Most recently, Amin Afshar Naderi, sentenced to 15 years in jail, was [let out on bail](#) after going three weeks without food.

Iranian Christian released on bail after 3 weeks on hunger strike



Amin Afshar-Naderi has been sentenced to 10 years in jail for “acting against national security by organising and conducting house-churches” and an additional five years for “insulting the sacred” (blasphemy).

World Watch Monitor (27.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2u2yR2v> - An Iranian Christian sentenced to 15 years in jail has been released on bail, three weeks after [writing an open letter to the authorities](#), asking what he had done to “make you hate me this much” and declaring that he had decided to “terminate my life slowly” through a hunger strike.

Amin Afshar-Naderi, who is said to be “very unwell”, had to sign over property deeds worth 80,000 US dollars to secure his bail, which is reliant upon the outcome of an appeal.

Another Iranian Christian [arrested alongside him](#) in August last year, Hadi Asgari, remains in prison.

Mansour Borji from advocacy group Article 18 told World Watch Monitor he remains “very concerned about Amin’s health and wellbeing, and also about Hadi, who has been in prison, consistently, for almost a year”.

The two men – both converts to Christianity – were sentenced alongside another convert, Kaviyan Fallah-Mohammadi, and their pastor, Victor Bet-Tamraz, both of whom are already out on bail.

All four men received 10-year sentences for “acting against national security by organising and conducting house-churches”. Afshar-Naderi received an additional five-year sentence for “insulting the sacred” (blasphemy).

Last week, another imprisoned Iranian Christian [began a hunger strike](#) to protest against Iran’s treatment of converts to Christianity.

Ebrahim Firouzi, 30, who has five years left of his own sentence for “acting against national security”, wrote his own statement criticising the Iranian government, in which

he referenced the “unjust and hefty verdicts and sentences against new Christian believers and converts to the point that in recent months tens of Christians have been sentenced to long years of imprisonment”.

Other Iranian Christians have also gone on hunger strikes to protest against their treatment, including [Maryam Naghash Zargaran](#), whose case was highlighted by Amnesty International last year when it [criticised Iran’s “cruel” denial of medical care in its prisons](#).

Amin Afshar-Naderi’s letter

“What have I done against you and our country that made you hate me this much? I have learned from the Bible to love my enemies and to pray for those who hate me. But what have you actually learned?

“I have learned not to speak in abusive language; what have YOU learned? You were using rude language during the interrogation, you made fun of my beliefs and attacked my monotheistic religion; I have never insulted you, not because I did not have the power to do so , but deep inside I have always prayed for your health.

“You have written a report filled with lies, stating that I have insulted your religious beliefs! You even forced my prison inmates to accept and sign the confession! I just watched you and prayed for you.

“It has been a year now that I have tolerated all the insults from my inmates, the prison guards and you all, while I have not done anything wrong and have been deprived of basic needs. However, I have always prayed for you to be fair and just. Not only did you not stick to any of your promises you gave in the court, in front of the pastor, my family, and all the people who were present, you hated me more and more every day and finally you hid my from the ambassadors of those selected countries you had in mind!

“I have no words. Do whatever you want, like what you have done until now, but not according to justice, morality and law. There is one question in my mind, if we are actually what you say we are and we have insulted your religious beliefs and if your judicial process from the time of arrest to interrogation and court sessions were all lawful, then why are you hiding us from people? This is alright. I surrender to your cruel decision and I have decided to terminate my life slowly and that is why I am on hunger strike. I promise you not to cost any financial loss to you. I even deny to receive any medicine. I hope you feel little better by seeing my slow death and suffering.”

More Christians receive excessive sentences

CSW (12.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2uhtl0k> - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has learned that Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, Mohammadreza Omidi, 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 Omidi 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 26th 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 15th 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."

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

Heavy sentences for Christians is being handed 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 Ramyyl 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.

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.”

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.

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.

Mohabat 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.

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.

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;

Bitah 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 تومان (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'arzadeh and Puya Azami Aqjeh.

Ms. Mahsa Sha'arzadeh, 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)

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.

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 26th 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 10th February after spending thirty-six days in jail, during which he was frequently interrogated. He spent one month of his arrest in solitary confinement.

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."