

**IRAN**

# The Cost of Faith

Persecution of Christian  
Protestants and Converts in Iran



**INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN  
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN**

[www.iranhumanrights.org](http://www.iranhumanrights.org)



## **The Cost of Faith**

Persecution of Christian  
Protestants and Converts in Iran

Copyright © International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran 2013

International Campaign  
for Human Rights in Iran  
New York Headquarters

---

Tel: +1 347-463-9517  
Fax: +1 347-463-9466

[www.iranhumanrights.org](http://www.iranhumanrights.org)

---

# The Cost of Faith

Persecution of Christian  
Protestants and Converts in Iran

**INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN**  
**FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN**

[www.iranhumanrights.org](http://www.iranhumanrights.org)



## ABOUT US

The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran is a non-partisan, independent human rights 501(c)3 non-profit organization based in New York that works actively in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. The Campaign's team is comprised of lawyers, researchers, and journalists with extensive professional experience at international organizations.

The mission of the Campaign is to promote human rights to ensure a culture of respect for the human dignity and rights of all and to hold Iranian state actors accountable to their international obligations.

The Campaign documents human rights violations in Iran via first-hand and original sources within the country, and publishes statements, appeals, blog posts, multimedia productions, and comprehensive reports in both English and Persian. The Campaign advocates with national governments and intergovernmental institutions, and cooperates with a broad range of civil society organizations on strategies aimed at protecting civil society and improving human rights in Iran.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>CHRISTIANITY IN IRAN</b>	<b>17</b>
<i>Ethnic Christians</i>	18
<i>Protestant Christians</i>	20
<i>The Growth of House Churches</i>	21
<b>OFFICIAL POLICY TOWARD HOUSE CHURCHES</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>INTERNATIONAL AND IRANIAN LAW</b>	
<b>ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>PERSECUTION OF PROTESTANT CONVERTS</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>Violations of the Right to Life</i>	29
<i>Arbitrary Arrest and Detention</i>	
<i>in International Law</i>	39
<i>Arbitrary Arrest and Detention in Iran</i>	41
<i>Torture and Ill Treatment</i>	
<i>in International and Iranian Law</i>	46
<i>Torture and Ill Treatment of Detainees</i>	47
<i>Prosecution of Protestants</i>	49
<i>Due Process and Access to a Lawyer</i>	51
<i>International and Iranian Law</i>	
<i>on Freedom of Assembly and Association</i>	52
<i>Restrictions on Assembly</i>	
<i>and Association in Iran</i>	53
<i>Monitoring and Harrassment</i>	57
<i>Free Expression under International</i>	
<i>and Iranian Law</i>	59
<i>Attacks on Free Expression</i>	
<i>and Access to Information in Iran</i>	60
<b>DISCRIMINATION</b>	<b>63</b>
<i>Non-Discrimination under</i>	
<i>International and Iranian Law</i>	63
<i>The Right to Work under</i>	
<i>International and Iranian Law</i>	64
<i>Employment Discrimination in Iran</i>	64
<i>Right to Education in International</i>	
<i>and Iranian Law</i>	67
<i>Discrimination in Education in Iran</i>	68
<i>Discrimination in Marriage and Family Life</i>	70
<i>Discrimination in the Penal Code</i>	71
<i>Access to Justice</i>	71
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>73</b>



Photo from the public domain

The Central Assembly of God Church in Tehran

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the Iranian government's assertions that it respects the rights of its recognized religious minorities, the Christian community in Iran faces systematic state persecution and discrimination. The plight of Iranian Protestants is of particular concern; this community faces severe restrictions on religious practice and association, arbitrary arrests and detentions for practicing their faith, and violations of the right to life through state execution and extrajudicial killings.

In this report, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran documents the rights violations of Protestant Christians in Iran within the context of international human rights law and the rights guaranteed within Iran's own constitution. The Campaign interviewed 31 Iranian Christians between April 2011 and July 2012 for this report, as well as lawyers who have represented Christians in Iran, Christian rights advocates, and Iranian Christian journalists. In addition, the Campaign reviewed primary documents including court verdicts, religious edicts from Shi'a clerics, and Iranian laws.

## Christians in Iran

There are no definitive statistics on the number of Christians, and Christian converts in particular, in Iran due to the lack of reliable polling. In 2010, the research group World Christian Database (WCD) recorded 270,057 Christians in Iran, or about 0.36 percent of the entire Iranian population of 74.7 million. In Iran, there are two main categories of Christians: ethnic and non-ethnic. The majority are ethnic Christians, which refers to Armenians and the Assyrians (or Chaldeans) who possess their own linguistic and cultural traditions. Most ethnic Christians are members of their community's Orthodox church. Non-ethnic Christians are for the most part members of Protestant churches and most, though not all, are converts who came from Muslim backgrounds. The WCD in 2010 reported approximately 66,700 Protestant Christians in Iran, which represents about 25 percent of the Iranian Christian community. The Iranian government does not recognize converts as Christians and many converts do not report their faith publicly due to fear of prosecution. Thus the number of converts in Iran is likely undercounted. Several Iranian Christian organizations indicated to the Campaign that the number of Christian converts could be as high as 500,000, but such estimates could not be independently confirmed.

## Ethnic Christians

Since the 1979 Revolution in Iran, authorities have granted ethnic Christians some rights to religious practice, such as holding their church services, running religious schools, and celebrating their major religious holidays. They are also guaranteed three seats in Parliament under Iran's constitution: two for Armenians and one for Assyrians. However, ethnic denominations are not allowed to hold services in the Persian language and many churches have experienced surveillance or have been forced to report their activities to the government. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has also limited churches' ability to renew their licenses, renovate their houses of worship, buy and sell church-owned property or construct new church buildings. Ethnic Christians are subject to a variety of discriminatory legal provisions that reserve certain public posts such as judges and the president to Muslims, assign non-Muslims harsher punishment for certain crimes, favor Muslim family members in inheritance, and restrict inter-religious marriages.

## Protestants

The Protestant community in Iran faces far more aggressive government restrictions and human rights abuses than ethnic Christian groups. This stems largely from their use of the Persian language in church services and literature and their commitment to proselytizing (all of which facilitate conversion, which is anathema to the regime), as well as the affiliations some Protestant churches have to denominations and church networks abroad. Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei and other Iranian officials consider Christian converts to be apostates and part of a broader foreign conspiracy aimed at undermining ideological support for the state.

While still comprising less than one percent of the country's population, Protestants in Iran have increased in numbers, largely as a result of growing evangelism. By the 1990s, Christian conversion began to worry the authorities, leading to a series of increasingly repressive measures such as placing more limitations on church attendance, shutting down Iran's main Persian-language bible publisher, arrest-

ing evangelical church leaders and, most significantly, executing a leading pastor on charges of apostasy in 1990. As a result of these repressive policies, many Protestants started to congregate in unofficial, informal churches in private residences, called “house churches.” By 2001, house churches had become popular, organized Christian spaces.

## **Intensified Persecution of Protestant Converts**

In 2005, coinciding roughly with the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian government ramped up its repression of Christian house churches, Persian-language Protestant churches, and converts. It has further intensified its efforts since 2010, under the rationale that evangelicals are a deviant form of Christianity, different from state-recognized Christianity, and that the house church movement is linked to “Western powers” and “Zionists” who are waging a soft war against the regime. As such, Iranian government, judiciary, security, and intelligence agencies have increasingly treated Protestant converts as a national security threat. Indeed, since 2005 authorities have arrested and prosecuted Protestants most often for security crimes against the state. Reflecting the increasingly political nature of its repression against this community, Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Intelligence Organization has reportedly taken over the oversight of Christian churches in Iran.

## **Denial of Freedom of Religion**

Under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Iran is obligated to safeguard freedom of religion. While Iran’s constitution recognizes Christianity and, to varying degrees, grants them many of the rights found in the ICCPR, in practice the government does not uphold these international and constitutional protections for its Protestant community. Measures systematically undertaken by the Iranian government, which include restricting church attendance, forbidding the formation of new churches, closing churches, restricting the distribution of bibles and Christian literature, harassing and monitoring church groups, arresting, detaining and prosecuting church leaders, criminalizing evangelism, and coercing Christians to return to Islam, are prohibited by the ICCPR. From apostasy charges that threaten the lives of converts to the imprisonment of church members involved in proselytizing—authorities have engaged in a pattern of human rights abuses that effectively criminalizes faith and manifestations of it. The Campaign’s research reveals that interrogators, prosecutors, and courts consistently refer to standard Christian practices as evidence of criminal activity or a criminal act itself. Membership in a house church, evangelical activities, and participation in a Christian conference are all seen by authorities as criminal acts, and security officers routinely confiscate standard Christian items such as bibles, religious literature, and crosses during arrests. Consequentially, many Iranian Christians, namely converts, including most of the individuals interviewed for this report, have fled the country seeking protection from past or future persecution.

## **Violation of the Right to Life**

The violation of the right to life is the most severe abuse the Iranian Protestant community faces. The lives of converts are particularly at risk because some religious authorities view apostasy as a criminal offense punishable by death. Apostasy, the act of abandoning or renouncing one’s religion, is not codi-



fied as a crime under Iran's penal code. However, Iranian law enforcement, prosecutors, and courts often treat the act as a crime. In order to circumvent the lack of codified prohibition of apostasy, prosecutors and judges invoke legal provisions in the Iranian constitution that allow courts to utilize Islamic jurisprudence. While Islamic law is open to different interpretations on this matter, Iranian courts typically rely on stringent interpretations held by conservative clerics such as the Islamic Republic of Iran's founding leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who view the act of leaving Islam for any other religion as a crime punishable by death.

Under the pending new Iranian penal code awaiting final approval, apostasy remains uncoded. However, the code includes a provision referring to Article 167 of the Iranian constitution that explicitly instructs judges to utilize Islamic legal sources where crimes or punishments are not covered by the code. This leaves the door open for the continued practice of relying on jurisprudence that holds apostasy to be a capital crime.

The Campaign has been able to document three cases of Christians charged with apostasy: those of Mehdi Dibaj, Youcef Nadarkhani, and Hossein Soodmand, and one case, that of Hossein Soodmand, in which a Christian was executed by the state for apostasy. Soodmand, a convert and pastor, was arrested in 1990. After two months in prison, during which time he reportedly refused to renounce his faith, Soodmand was executed by hanging. It is not known whether he had a trial. Nadarkhani, also a convert and pastor, was arrested in 2009 and subsequently sentenced to death. His retrial, granted upon appeal, garnered international attention; after pressure from the UN, the European Union, international human rights organizations, and the Vatican, he was acquitted on apostasy charges and sentenced instead to three years imprisonment for charges linked to evangelism. He was released in 2012 on time served.

## **Extrajudicial Killings**

The more common threat to life Protestant converts face comes from what are widely considered to be extrajudicial killings. Dibaj, one of the pastors aforementioned who was charged with apostasy, was arrested in 1984 and sentenced to death in 1993. He was released in January 1994 after his case was leaked to the international media and concerted pressure was brought to bear by foreign MPs, human rights organizations, the European Union, the US House of Representatives, and church leaders. He had spent ten years in prison. Six months after Dibaj's release, his body was found in a forest. Those behind his killing were never identified.

Haik Hovsepian, who had been Dibaj's public advocate, was also murdered under suspicious circumstances. Hovsepian, a pastor, disappeared three days after he helped secure Dibaj's release in 1994. Eleven days later his body was found; his killers were never identified. The family of Hovsepian reported to the Campaign that there were extreme irregularities and gross negligence in the investigation of his death.

Tateos Mikaelian, the reverend who had become Chair of the Council of Protestants after Hovsepian's death, was also found dead in 1994, reportedly shot several times in the head. Iranian authorities claimed that the opposition group Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) committed the crime, and convicted three MEK members who had in fact confessed to the crime. However, informed observers have cast doubt on the MEK's responsibility for Mikaelian's murder, linking it instead to Ministry of Intelligence officials.

Indeed, there have been numerous reports of suspicious deaths of Christian leaders involving unidentified assailants and subsequent investigative irregularities marked by a lack of due diligence. In the years after the 1979 Revolution, unidentified assailants assassinated prominent Iranian Protestants such as Reverend Arastoo Sayah and Bahram Dehghani, and attempted to assassinate Anglican Bishop Hassan Dehghani, Bahram's father. Other suspicious deaths include that of Reverend Mohammad Bagher Yousefi, reportedly found hung from a tree in 1996, and Pastor Ghorban Tourani, a house church leader whose throat was allegedly cut in front of his home in 2005. The lack of investigative rigor following these murders suggests government complicity in either the killings or the cover up.

Apostasy convictions, the execution of Soodmand, and the unresolved assassination of Christian leaders serve as a public warning to all Christians. Moreover, interviewees reported to the Campaign that during arrests, interrogations, and detentions, judicial or security officers directly threatened them with apostasy charges and execution, or threatened that they would be killed extrajudicially after their release.

### **Arbitrary Arrest and Detention**

Protestants in Iran have also been increasingly subjected to arbitrary arrests and detentions. The rate of arrests, detentions, and prosecutions has increased since 2005, under President Ahmadinejad, and intensified further after 2009. Of the 31 Christians the Campaign interviewed, 15 had been arrested and detained by authorities. Detentions ranged from a few hours to a year and a half; eight of them lasted over a month. Authorities formally charged 11 of the Christians with crimes, leading to prosecution in nine cases. According to Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, over 300 Christians have been arbitrarily arrested and detained throughout the country since 2010, 41 of which were detained for periods ranging from one month to over a year. Publicly available figures on Christian arrests and detentions could be significantly lower than actual numbers, as many arrestees fear further government persecution if they come forward. Most Christians arrested by authorities are eventually released, often with heavy bails. However, in many cases the investigations are never closed, nor are charges, if there are any, dismissed. This enables the government to restrict the person's religious practice through the threat of future arrest or prosecution. Most publically reported arrests have been attributed to the Ministry of Intelligence. However, starting in May of 2012 the Campaign began receiving reports from multiple sources of involvement by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in arrests.

When arrested individuals are detained, in many cases it is for the purpose of coercing statements from the detainees. Interrogators often use the threat of criminal prosecution, ill treatment, the arrest of family members, prolonged detainment, or execution for apostasy in order to extort information about the detainee's church activities and the activities of other church members. Release is offered in return for compliance. In some cases, detainees experienced extended detentions without any charges, formal indictment, trial, or judicial sentencing.

### **Torture and Ill Treatment During Detention**

The Campaign's interviews with detained Christians uncovered first-hand accounts of ill treatment during detainment. Article 7 of the ICCPR states: "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." The Human Rights Committee notes in its General Comment 20

that Article 7 makes clear that “prolonged solitary confinement of the detained or imprisoned person may amount to acts prohibited by Article 7.” Article 38 of the Iranian constitution also prohibits torture and ill treatment. Nevertheless, six Christians interviewed by the Campaign reported being held in solitary confinement for extended periods of time, coupled with minimal contact with family, repeated interrogations, blindfolding, and poor prison conditions. The Campaign also uncovered a few first-hand accounts of physical abuse that included beatings, floggings, being hung from a hook and beaten with cables and hoses, and being burned with cigarettes. Detainees were told that if they talked about their interrogation or torture with anyone, they would be killed extrajudicially.

### **Prosecution of Protestant Converts as National Security Threats**

While judicial authorities sometimes charge Christians with the religious crimes of apostasy or blasphemy (i.e. “insulting Islam,” which appears to be used by prosecutors and judges as a substitution for an apostasy charge in order to avoid international criticism), the prosecution of Protestant converts for political or national security crimes in Revolutionary Courts is far more frequent. The most common charges include “propaganda against the regime,” “acting against national security,” “contact with a foreign enemy [or] anti-regime groups,” and “colluding with enemy foreigners.” The Campaign found that the evidentiary bases for these charges and prosecutions were basic Christian activities, such as evangelizing, hosting church services or bible studies, attending Christian conferences, or distributing bibles. Iranian officials also often interpret association with an organization based abroad as a national security crime.

### **Lack of Due Process in Court Proceedings**

Court proceedings in cases involving Protestants are typically characterized by a lack of due process in Iran. Several interviewees told the Campaign that they did not have access to a lawyer or, if they did, that their lawyer was denied full access to his or her client’s files and thus unable to prepare a full defense in court.

### **Denial of Freedom of Assembly and Association**

In addition to arrests, detentions, and violations of the right to life, the Government of Iran systematically denies freedom of assembly and association to Protestants. Article 22 of the ICCPR, to which Iran is a party, mandates that “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of association with others.” Article 26 of Iran’s constitution similarly grants recognized religious minorities the freedom to form associations. In practice, the Iranian government has consistently breached these obligations. According to Christian rights advocates, the government has not granted a license for the establishment of a new church organization or allowed the construction of any church building, ethnic Orthodox, Protestant, or other, since the 1979 Revolution. It has required recognized churches to limit attendance to pre-existing church members, excluding recent converts. It will not permit Christians to gather in informal house church groups for services, holidays or bible studies. It has placed restrictions on the days of the week that church services are permitted, thereby reducing the ability of Iranians to partake in Christian services. The government aggressively closes house churches, disburses congregations, and arrests church leaders, charging them with crimes on the basis of their efforts to organize a church. It has also stopped

Christians from attending international religious conferences, in violation of Article 12 of the ICCPR, which guarantees free movement and the right to leave one's own country. These and other limitations severely undermine the ability of Christians to freely form and join congregations and practice their faith.

## **Denial of Freedom of Expression**

Christians' right to free expression in Iran, guaranteed under international law and also provided for in Article 24 of the Iranian constitution, is also routinely denied. Article 19 (2) of the ICCPR guarantees "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression," and the Human Rights Committee overseeing implementation of the ICCPR notes that free expression includes the right to express "religious discourse." As a corollary right, Article 18 of the ICCPR protects the right to "prepare and distribute religious texts or publications." The Iranian constitution also provides for free expression. However, in practice the Iranian government violates this right. Christians are arrested, detained, and prosecuted for evangelism and for distributing Christian literature. Persian-language Christian websites are blocked, and the four Persian-language Christian satellite stations are intermittently jammed. Access to the Bible is significantly curtailed: the publication and import of the Bible has been largely prohibited and there have been instances of security officials confiscating bibles, and, in some cases, burning bibles, and arresting Christians for distributing bibles. The government also severely restricts the use of Persian in churches, diminishing the accessibility of sermons to the largely Farsi-speaking population.

## **State Harassment and Monitoring of Christians**

Church groups are also routinely subjected to state monitoring and harassment in Iran. This monitoring takes both open and covert forms. The Ministry of Intelligence, police, or Revolutionary Courts will summon church leaders for questioning and try to coerce them into providing information about church activities, services, education programs, and the names and backgrounds of church members. Christians also reported to the Campaign that Intelligence officers told them they were following them and tapping their phones. The information gathered by the Ministry of Intelligence then becomes the basis for arrests, prosecutions, and the closure of churches.

## **Systematic Discrimination Against Christians**

The Christian community in Iran, and in particular, Protestant converts, also face systematic discrimination in almost all walks of life. Article 26 of the ICCPR provides that: "All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law." Yet the Iranian government has failed to protect Christians from discrimination in many key areas, including employment, education, and access to justice. In some areas, including marriage and family life, as well as in Iran's penal code, Iranian law blatantly discriminates between Muslims and Christians.

## **Employment Discrimination**

Article 6 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) protects the right to work. As such, the state must prevent discrimination in the workplace and in hiring and firing. Among the most common forms of discrimination experienced by Iranian Christians is employment discrimination, both by the state and by private sector employers. Interviewees reported to the Campaign that they were dismissed from jobs or refused employment because of their faith. Employers appear particularly sensitive to converts. Employment application forms for both the private and public sector always require applicants to report their religion, and family names often allow most Iranians to be able to instantly infer whether or not someone is from an ethnic Christian, Muslim, or other background. Christians can also face obstacles starting a business or obtaining business loans and permits. In some instances, particularly in government, employment discrimination is codified in law. Iran's constitution requires that certain public officials be Muslim, including the head of state (the Supreme Leader), the president, judges, and all MPs with the exception of the five slots designated for minority religious communities.

## **Denial of Education**

Article 13 of the ICESCR "recognize(s) the right of everyone to education," and Article 30 of the Iranian constitution states, "The government must provide all citizens with free education up to secondary school." However, Christians face significant discrimination in education. This takes the form of expulsion from or denial of admissions to public educational institutions, or the refusal to grant a diploma despite the completion of coursework. As a matter of policy, authorities bar many Iranians from higher education as a form of punishment or as a method of restricting the social advancement of students who partake in religious or political activities with which the government disapproves.

## **Discrimination in Marriage and Family Life and in the Iranian Penal Code**

Iranian laws regarding marriage and family life also openly discriminate against Christians (or any non-Muslim) regarding inheritance law, marriage between a Muslim woman and non-Muslim man, guardianship of a child, and custody rights in divorce proceedings. The Iranian penal code also subscribes harsher punishments against non-Muslims in matters of consensual and nonconsensual sex and in the case of violent crimes.

## **Deprivation of Access to Justice**

Christian converts are effectively deprived of access to justice since they believe that if it is revealed in court that they are converts, they will be seen as apostates. Christians interviewed by the Campaign regularly expressed the fear that a judge would see their "apostasy" as a misdeed outweighing whatever complaint they had against the other party.

## **Conclusion**

The evidence of the systematic persecution of and discrimination against Protestant converts in Iran, in violation of international law and Iran's own constitution, is demonstrated in great detail through first-hand testimony and documentation in this report. These violations demand international attention. The Iranian government has shown that it is responsive to international pressure, as reflected in the acquittal of Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani of apostasy. However, hundreds of Protestant converts continue to be prosecuted under vague national security charges and remain in danger of being charged with apostasy, and Protestants continue to be denied their basic rights in almost all walks of life. The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran calls upon the international community to hold Iran accountable for its rights violations and to take concerted action to protect and uphold the rights of the Protestant community in Iran.

## METHODOLOGY

For this report the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interviewed 31 Iranian Christians between April 2011 and July 2012. About half of the interviews took place in person with Iranian Christian refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey during April 2011. The remaining were conducted using other means such as Skype video, telephone and email.

All but three interviewees identified themselves as victims of human rights abuses within Iran and in some cases they witnessed the abuse of others. Some interviewees, fearing for their own safety or the safety of family members, chose to speak to the Campaign under the condition of anonymity or wanted to be identified by their first name only. The Campaign refers to these interviewees by pseudonyms comprised of a first name and last initial (e.g. Leila N.).

The Campaign also interviewed lawyers who have represented Christians in Iran, Christian rights advocates, and Iranian Christian journalists who report for Persian-language news sites.

All interviews but three were conducted in Persian (Farsi) and were translated by the Campaign.

In addition to interview-based research, the Campaign reviewed primary documents including court verdicts, religious edicts from Shi'a clerics, and Iranian laws. Secondary sources include reports by the United Nations and international human rights organizations, Iranian state and semi-state media, and international media. Four Christian sources are utilized extensively in this report: the research group World Christian Database, the Iranian Christian rights group Article 18, and the Iranian websites Farsi Christian News Network and *Mohabat News*. The Campaign conducted lengthy discussions with these organizations about methodology and believe them to be credible and reliable sources.

The Iranian government does not allow any human rights organizations such as the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran to enter the country to conduct independent investigations into human rights abuses.

## INTRODUCTION

*“[Iran’s enemies] want to diminish the people’s faith in Islam and Islam’s sanctities. Inside the country, using various means they [want to] shake the foundation of the faith of the people, especially the young generation. From the spread of loose and shameless lifestyles, to the promotion of false mysticism - the fake variety of real [Islamic] mysticism—to the spread [of] Baha’ism, to the spread of a network of house churches; these are the actions that are being undertaken today—with tact and calculation and careful study—by enemies of Islam. And their goal is to weaken the religion within the society.”<sup>1</sup>*

—Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Iran

When Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, visited the city of Qom in October of 2010, he took the opportunity to talk about threats to the Islamic Republic posed by certain minority faiths. Khamenei’s disparagement of these religious groups was indicative of a systematic government policy that aims to isolate and restrict groups with which it disapproves. Not surprisingly, Khamenei warned against the influence of the Baha’i faith, the traditional target of state persecution ever since the 1979 Revolution. Khamenei also cautioned against the growth of Sufi Islam or “false mysticism.”

Khamenei’s last warning was about the spread of Protestant Christianity and the “network of house churches” in Iran where Protestants gather. While still comprising less than one percent of the country’s population, Protestants in Iran have increased in numbers and presence, largely as a result of growing evangelicalism. The Iranian government’s reaction to the growth of this religious minority has not been subtle: Khamenei and other Iranian officials view converts as apostates punishable by death, and Protestant house churches and evangelicals as part of a broader foreign conspiracy aimed at undermining ideological support for the state.

As a result, Iranian government, judiciary, security and intelligence agencies have subjected Protestants

<sup>1</sup> Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, “Speech At The People’s Large Gathering In Qom,” (“Bayanat dar Ejtemae Bozorg Mardom Qom”), October 19, 2010, <http://www.leader.ir/langs/fa/index.php?p=bayanat&id=7363> (accessed June 25, 2012).



to a variety of human rights abuses including severe restrictions of religious practice, assembly and association, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and violations of the right to life.

To the international community Iranian officials have stressed that they respect the rights of Christians and other “recognized” religions. During Iran’s February 2010 Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council, Yonathan Betkolia, a member of the Iranian Parliament for the Assyrian Christian minority, said:

Under the constitution of the IRI [Islamic Republic of Iran], race, ethnicity and religion do not distinguish among people, bestowing superiority to one group over another. For this reason, there is no discriminatory approach in laws, legislations or policy-making processes of the IRI. The recognized religious minorities in Iran are Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians who have resided in the country for a very long time and coexisted peacefully with their other compatriots. The followers of these religions are fully free to practice their faith, conduct their education, and own their own numerous sacred places and cemeteries. According to Article 13 of the constitution, religious minorities can freely conduct their religious rights and ceremonies, and act according to their own canons in matters relating to their civil affairs.<sup>2</sup>

Yet despite Betkolia’s public defense of the government, Iran’s actual practices towards religious minorities, especially Protestant converts, have raised international concern. The UN Human Rights Committee, in the Concluding Observation from its review of Iran’s civil and political rights record in 2011, stated:

The Committee is concerned about discrimination against members of the Christian minority, including arrests based on charges of proselytizing as well as a ban on conducting Christian services in the Farsi language. The Committee also notes with concern that individuals who have converted from Islam have been arrested.<sup>3</sup>

In this report the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran documents the persecution of and discrimination against Protestants and Christian converts within the context of international human rights law and the rights guaranteed within Iran’s own constitution. This report details the growing repression and persecution of this community and outlines the main rights violations against Christians in Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Council, Seventh Universal Periodic Review, Yonathan Betkolia during interactive dialogue, February 15, 2010, <http://un.org/webcast/unhrc/archive.asp?go=100215> (accessed February 3, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, “Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 40 of the Covenant,” Concluding Observations, CCPR/C/IRN/CO/3, November 29, 2011, para. 23, <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/hrcs103.htm> (accessed September 4, 2012).

## CHRISTIANITY IN IRAN

Broadly speaking, Iranian Christians can be grouped into two categories: ethnic and non-ethnic. Ethnic Christians include the Armenians and the Assyrians (or Chaldeans), who possess their own linguistic and cultural traditions.<sup>4</sup> Most are members of their community's Orthodox church (the Apostolic Church of Armenia and the Assyrian Church of the East<sup>5</sup>) but some are also Catholics or Protestants.<sup>6</sup> Non-ethnic Christians are for the most part members of Protestant churches, and most are converts who once personally identified as Muslim or came from Muslim backgrounds.<sup>7</sup>

The last available official Iranian census from 2006 recorded 109,415 Christians in the country or about 0.15 percent of the total population.<sup>8</sup> The government figure is lower than that of international sources, which put the number of Christians in Iran between 200,000 and 300,000, the latter number being reported by the United Nations in 2001.<sup>9</sup> There are no definitive statistics on the number of Christians, and Christian converts in particular, in Iran due to the lack of reliable polling. In 2010 the World Christian Database (WCD), which gathers global statistics on Christians, recorded 270,057 Christians in Iran, or about 0.36 percent of the entire Iranian population of 74.7 million.<sup>10</sup> The majority were ethnic Christians, with

<sup>4</sup> See "World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Iran: Christians," *Minority Rights Group International*, <http://www.minority-rights.org/5109/iran/christians.html> (accessed March 2, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> World Christian Database, 2010 Denomination of Country: Iran, <http://worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/default.asp> (accessed April 6, 2012); Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 36; A. Christian Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia and the Status of Non-Muslims in Iran* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), p. 200.

<sup>6</sup> World Christian Database, "Iran."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Statistical Centre of Iran, "Analysis and Survey of the Social-Economic Features Based on Religion in the 2006 Census" ("Tahlil Va Baressi Vijegihaaye Ejtemayi-Eghtesadi Bar Hasb Din Dar Sar Shomari 1385"), <http://www.amar.org.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=133>. <http://www.amar.org.ir/Portals/2/fileExcell/11.pdf> (accessed April 10, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> UN General Assembly, Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Fifty-sixth session, 2001); Statistical Centre of Iran, "Analysis and Survey of the Social-Economic Features Based on Religion in the 2006 Census" ("Tahlil Va Baressi Vijegihaaye Ejtemayi-Eghtesadi Bar Hasb Din Dar Sar Shomari 1385"), <http://www.amar.org.ir/Portals/2/fileExcell/11.pdf> (Persian PDF). <http://www.amar.org.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=133> (English landing page) (accessed August 1, 2012.)

<sup>10</sup> The World Bank, "Population, total," <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?page=6> (accessed July 23, 2012). World Christian Database, "Iran"; Note: In 2008, Minority Rights Group International estimated between 200,000 and 250,000, <http://www.minorityrights.org/5109/iran/christians.html> (accessed July 23, 2012). Note: By comparison the percentage of Muslims in the country is about 98 percent (89 percent Shi'a, 9 percent Sunni) according to the U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities*,

Armenians at 100,940 members or 37 percent of all Christians, followed by Assyrians at 74,000 or 27 percent of Christians.<sup>11</sup>

The WCD in 2010 reported approximately 66,700 Protestant Christians in Iran: 21,700 were government-recognized, comprising ethnic Protestants and Protestants who had converted before or shortly after the 1979 Revolution, and another 45,000 were Christians who represent more recent converts whom the government does not recognize.<sup>12</sup> In all, according to WCD, Protestants make up about 25 percent of the Iranian Christian community and 0.09 percent of the national population.<sup>13</sup> Some evangelical Christian groups estimate the number of Protestant Christians and converts in Iran is well above 100,000 but their methodology is unclear.<sup>14</sup> Since the government does not recognize converts as Christians and many converts do not report their faith on government forms due to fear of prosecution, the number converts in Iran is likely undercounted.<sup>15</sup> Executive Director of the Farsi Christian News Network, Shahab Ebrahimi, told the Campaign he is aware of credible research indicating the number of Christian converts to be as high as 500,000<sup>16</sup> but this estimate could not be independently confirmed. Protestants in Iran subscribe to a wide range of denominations, including the Anglican, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches, as well as non-denominational churches.<sup>17</sup>

## Ethnic Christians

Since the 1979 Revolution, Iranian authorities have granted ethnic Christians some basic rights to religious practice, such as holding church services, running religious schools, and celebrating their major holidays.<sup>18</sup> Some of their large events are covered by the media and the government.<sup>19</sup> Like other recognized religious minorities, the Armenian and Assyrian communities are guaranteed seats in Parliament under Iran's constitution: two for Armenians and one for Assyrians.<sup>20</sup>

However, Armenians and Assyrians in Iran also suffer government restrictions. Ethnic denominations

---

by Hussein D. Hassan, CRS Report RL34021 (Washington, DC: Office of Congressional Information and Publishing, November 25, 2008), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL34021.pdf>, (accessed July 24, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> World Christian Database, "Iran." Note: The number of Armenians has dropped significantly over the last 30 years, from an estimated 250,000 in the mid-1970s, due to a high rate of emigration. Similar emigration rates are reported for Assyrians. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran noted in 2001 that local sources reported that these Christians were emigrating at a rate of 15,000 to 20,000 per year. See Massoume Price, *Iran's Diverse Peoples: A Reference Sourcebook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2005) p. 314; Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*; Note: Since the mid-1990s various non-governmental sources have estimated there are 10,000 to 15,000 Protestant Christians in Iran. However these numbers only seem to cover official members of government-recognized churches, which more or less includes ethnic Christian churches that practice Protestantism or members of churches recognized before the 1979 Revolution. Recognized church members can include converts and children of converts, but generally these are people who converted before or shortly after the 1979 Revolution. These numbers however most likely do not account for more recent converts that tend to worship in informal churches, called house churches; See Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 44; "World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Iran: Christians," *Minority Rights Group International (MRGI)*, <http://www.minorityrights.org/5109/iran/christians.html> (accessed July 23, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> "Iran," *Operation World*, <http://www.operationworld.org/iran> (accessed July 23, 2012); Email communication from Elam Ministries to International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, July 10, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Massoume Price, *Iran's Diverse Peoples: A Reference Sourcebook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2005); Statistical Centre of Iran, "Analysis and Survey of the Social-Economic Features Based on Religion in the 2006 Census" ("Tahlil Va Baressi Vijeghaaye Ejetemayi-Eghtesadi Bar Hasb Din Dar Sar Shomari 1385"), <http://www.amar.org.ir/Portals/2/fileExcell/11.pdf> (accessed April 10, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Executive Director Shahab Ebrahimi, Farsi Christian News Network, November 2, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> World Christian Database, "Iran"; Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia*, p. 199; "World Directory," *MRGI*.

<sup>18</sup> "World Directory," *MRGI*; Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia*, p. 200.

<sup>19</sup> Price, *Iran's Diverse Peoples*, p. 313.

<sup>20</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979, art. 64, translation available at <http://www.mfa.gov.ir/NewsShow.aspx?id=580&menu=77&lang=en> (accessed August 6, 2012).

are not allowed to hold services in the Persian language and authorities expect them to exclude non-Armenians and non-Assyrians from services.<sup>21</sup> Many churches have experienced surveillance or have been forced to report their activities to the government.<sup>22</sup> The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance also limits churches' ability to renew their licenses, renovate their houses of worship, and buy and sell church-owned property.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, according to rights advocates, authorities have not allowed the construction of any new church buildings, including those of Orthodox Armenians and Assyrians, since the 1979 Revolution.<sup>24</sup> Ethnic Christians also are subject to a variety of discriminatory legal provisions that reserve certain ranking public posts such as judges and the president to Muslims, assign non-Muslims harsher punishment for certain crimes, favor Muslim family members in inheritance, and restrict inter-religious marriages.<sup>25</sup>

"Armenians and Assyrians who belong to an Orthodox church enjoy certain liberties within a framework that Iranian security forces have set: you speak in your own language, you preach to your own community, and you don't have anything to do with the Muslim, non-Christian community," explained Mansour Borji of the Iranian Christian rights group Article 18.<sup>26</sup>



Photo from the public domain

A woman enters Abadan Church, an Armenian church in southwestern Iran.

Orthodox Armenians and Assyrians tend to avoid conflict with the Iranian government. They do not carry out any proselytizing activities<sup>27</sup> and they try to prevent Muslims from entering their congregations.<sup>28</sup>

In some cases, Armenian and Assyrian Members of Parliament (MPs) have gone beyond avoiding conflict with the government. For example, some MPs have defended the Iranian government's religious rights record in international forums, and have condemned the UN's censure of Iran for its treatment of religious minorities. They argue such charges are politically motivated, and that the difficulties of religious minorities in Iran are less than those facing minorities in Europe.<sup>29</sup> Borji contends that these MPs could best be understood as representing the interests of their ethnic Orthodox communities and are not representatives of Iranian Christians *per se*.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>21</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, October 11, 2011; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji, Article 18, May 31, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari; Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia*, p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari.

<sup>24</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji.

<sup>25</sup> The Civil Code of Islamic Republic of Iran, *Daneshvar Publication*, 1928, [http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,legal,,legislation,irn,,49997a\\_db27,0.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,legal,,legislation,irn,,49997a_db27,0.html) (accessed August 3, 2012), arts. 881, 1059, and 1192.

<sup>26</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji.

<sup>27</sup> "World Directory," *MRGI*; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji.

<sup>28</sup> Avi Davidi and Eliz Sanasarian, "Domestic Tribulations and International Repercussions: the State and the Transformation of non-Muslims in Iran," *Journal of International Affairs* vol. 60 (2007), p. 59; "World Directory," *MRGI*.

<sup>29</sup> "World Directory," *MRGI*; "Interview with Yonathan Betkolia, Assyrian Representative in the Iranian Parliament about the Human Rights Council in Switzerland" (Goftegou Ba Yonathan Betkolia, Namayande Iranian Ashouri Dar Majles Shoraye Islami Darbareh Ejlās Hoghoghe Bashār Swiss), *Javan Online*, March 14, 2010, <http://www.javanonline.ir/vdcj8ye8iuqev8z.fsfu.html> (accessed July 23, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji, Article 18, May 31, 2012.



Two boys pray at the Armenian Anglican Church of Tehran.

## Protestant Christians

Theoretically, Protestants, along with Armenians and Assyrians, are among the Christians recognized in the Islamic Republic's constitution.<sup>31</sup> In practice however, they have been persecuted and discriminated against, and have faced significantly more aggressive government restrictions and human rights abuses than ethnic Christian groups.<sup>32</sup>

Most observers attribute the government's targeting of Protestants to several factors.

First, most Protestant groups conduct their

religious activities in the Persian language and disseminate the Bible and other Christian texts in Persian.<sup>33</sup> Second, many churches actively proselytize despite the government's warning that they must stop.<sup>34</sup> Both practices facilitate conversion, anathema to the regime. The affiliations that some of the Protestant churches have to foreign entities have also added to the government's disapproval.<sup>35</sup> Formal affiliations are often theological. Many churches belong to specific denominations, such as Anglicanism or Presbyterianism, or church networks such as the Assemblies of God, which originate in other countries.<sup>36</sup> Informal affiliations are usually with Christian organizations, such as the UK-based Elam Ministries, which provide bibles and religious literature to Iranian Christians and training for congregation leaders.<sup>37</sup> Members of the Iranian diaspora run some of these organizations.

In the Protestant community, government-recognized churches are mostly comprised of Protestants of Armenian and Assyrian descent, or long-time (pre-1979) converts from Muslim backgrounds.<sup>38</sup> After the 1979 Revolution, authorities allowed some government-recognized Protestant churches to remain open and hold services in Persian, but imposed restrictions on church attendance largely aimed at preventing the growth of Protestantism among Iranians.<sup>39</sup> For example, they tried to require recognized churches to limit attendance to pre-existing church members, excluding recent converts and non-Christians,<sup>40</sup> and

<sup>31</sup> See International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "Protestants Acquitted of Political Charges, Recognized Under the Constitution," May 18, 2011, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/05/protestants-acquitted-recognized-under-constitution/> (accessed August 1, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari; "World Directory," *MRGI*.

<sup>33</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Iran: Religious and Ethnic Minorities: Discrimination in Law and Practice*, vol. 9, no. 7(E), September 1997, <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1997/iran/> (accessed March 2, 2012); International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji, Article 18, May 31, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Nazir-Ali, "Christianity in Iran: A Brief Survey," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* vol. 9 (2009), p. 37; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji.

<sup>35</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari; Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia*, p. 178.

<sup>36</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji; World Christian Database, "Iran."

<sup>37</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji; World Christian Database, "Iran."

<sup>38</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Executive Director Shahab Ebrahimi, Farsi Christian News Network, December 7, 2011; See The Law Regarding the Activities of Political and Professional Parties, Groups and Organizations, and Islamic Associations, or Recognized Religious Minorities, August 29, 1981, <http://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/legislation/political-parties-law/> (accessed August 1, 2012), arts. 4, 5 and 6.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities*, by Hussein D. Hassan, CRS Report RL34021 (Washington, DC: Office of Congressional Information and Publishing, November 25, 2008), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL34021.pdf>, (accessed July 24, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> HRW, *Iran: Religious and Ethnic Minorities*; U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities*, by Hussein D. Hassan, CRS Report RL34021 (Washington, DC: Office of Congressional Information and Publishing, November 25, 2008), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL34021.pdf>, (accessed July 24, 2012).

refused to recognize any new Protestant church organizations.<sup>41</sup>

During the 1990s, Protestant evangelicalism in Iran became more pronounced. Indeed, much of the recent Christian conversion in Iran appears to be linked to evangelical Christianity, which is a theological strain within Protestantism that emphasizes the Christian doctrine of sharing the message of the Bible with non-Christians and nominal-Christians.<sup>42</sup> As Mansour Borji of Article 18 explains:

Being evangelical is not quite a denomination but a theological conviction that believes in the free choice of the individual and that everyone must have an opportunity to be presented with the message of the gospel and Jesus. And people have to choose for themselves.<sup>43</sup>

While the importance of proselytizing and missionary work is a religious tenet found in most variants of Christianity, evangelicals place more emphasis on these practices.<sup>44</sup> By the late 2000s, Iranian Protestants could be found within nearly every ethnicity in the country, including Persian, Armenian, Assyrian, Kurdish, Turkmen and Azari Turk.<sup>45</sup>

## The Growth of House Churches

As Protestant congregations swelled due to increased conversion and natural population growth, many recognized Protestant churches could no longer accommodate the needs of their congregations.<sup>46</sup> Some recognized churches were able to establish new branches in existing buildings with the government's knowledge.<sup>47</sup> Yet space limitations as well as the government's constraints on churches and its policies against conversion led many Protestants to form house churches, which are informal, unofficial (i.e. not recognized by the state) churches in private residences across the country where new Christians could gather, worship and proselytize.<sup>48</sup>

As Ibrahim S. told the Campaign:

[Our] house churches were not affiliated with recognized churches because the latter were under pressure from the government and could not support the former. If [the recognized churches] did [support us], they would be shut down. House churches [were set up] by individuals who could not attend recognized churches or because there was such an increase in Christians, recognized churches could not accommodate them.<sup>49</sup>

By the 1990s, the growth of the Christian convert community in Iran led to a series of increasingly

<sup>41</sup> Michael Nazir-Ali, "Christianity in Iran: A Brief Survey," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, vol. 9 (2009), p. 37-38.

<sup>42</sup> HRW, *Iran: Religious and Ethnic Minorities*.

<sup>43</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji, Article 18, May 31, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia*, p. 209; U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities*, by Hussein D. Hassan, CRS Report RL34021 (Washington, DC: Office of Congressional Information and Publishing, November 25, 2008), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL34021.pdf>, (accessed July 24, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> World Christian Database, 2010 Denomination of Country: Iran, <http://worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/default.asp> (accessed April 6, 2012); Michael Nazir-Ali, "Christianity in Iran: A Brief Survey," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* vol. 9 (2009), p. 37.

<sup>46</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Executive Director Shahab Ebrahimi, Farsi Christian News Network, December 7, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Shahab Ebrahimi.

<sup>48</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji.

<sup>49</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Firouz Sadegh-Khanjani, January 4 and February 16, 2012.



Karim Khan Church in Tehran

repressive measures, such as placing more limitations on recognized church attendance, shutting down Iran's main Persian-language bible publisher, arresting evangelical church leaders and, most significantly, executing a pastor on the charge of apostasy.<sup>50</sup> The growth of the house church movement, especially among Protestant converts, must be seen in light of this growing repression.<sup>51</sup> By about 2001, house churches had become popular, organized Christian spaces.<sup>52</sup> Borji notes that most are theologically evangelical.<sup>53</sup> These underground churches became a place not only for converts, restricted from attending registered churches, to practice their new faith, but also a place where Iranians interested in Christianity could go to learn about the religion.<sup>54</sup>

Borji, himself a covert, told the Campaign that the government's own efforts to restrict conversion led directly to the house church movement, resulting in more conversions.

I was a church member in Iran for some years before I left, and I remember back then around 1993 we only had a few churches in Tehran we could attend. I personally had to drive for two hours to get to church, and I begged the church to have some sort of Christian fellowship in our neighborhood so that people wouldn't have to travel so far to get to church. But back then it was not taken very seriously.

Once the Iranian government increased the level of persecution and pressured churches to not allow any other non-Christians to attend then the church went underground. The explosion of the house church movement was really the result of the government's own pressure on the church.

For example, I just read something a month ago in [the semi-official] Fars News. The article started out saying "There is a new round of activities by evangelical Christians in small towns and villages," and continued, "In light of restrictions placed on them they have moved from big cities to villages and small towns."

So you are saying that you put limits on [the church] and it ended up in the countryside. So you are your own problem.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Michael Nazir-Ali, "Christianity in Iran: A Brief Survey," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, vol. 9 (2009), p. 37-38; *Encyclopedia Iranica*, October 18, 2011, s.v. "Christianity VIII. Christian Missions in Persia," <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/christianity-viii> (accessed March 2, 2012); "World Directory," *MRGI*.

<sup>51</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari.  
<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji.

<sup>54</sup> Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia*, p. 209.

<sup>55</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji.

Of the 31 Christians interviewed by the Campaign, 21 were converts. All were from Muslim backgrounds with varying degrees of personal religiosity. Many reported being only nominally Muslim or not ever having considered themselves Muslim despite their family background and legal identity. Some reported being very devout Muslims before conversion. Nearly every Christian convert who spoke to the Campaign said they were introduced to Christianity through friends or family members. One interviewee said they had first been introduced to the religion via a Christian Persian satellite station. Almost all the Christians told the Campaign that they were members of house churches. Some said their house churches were very actively engaged in proselytizing, but others said that partly out of fear of government persecution, they limited their house church to a small group and made no effort to find new members.



## OFFICIAL POLICY TOWARD HOUSE CHURCHES

The growth of the house church movement has increasingly concerned the Iranian government. In September 2010, during an event honoring Iranian veterans from the Iran-Iraq war, Heydar Moslehi, Minister of Intelligence, told the crowd “With house churches, the evangelical current yearly takes thousands of individuals to Christianity and baptizes hundreds.”<sup>56</sup> In October 2010, Javan Online, a website run by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, reported that “In recent months, house churches have spread in the city of Mashhad and reports indicate 200 house churches have been discovered in the city.”<sup>57</sup> Javan also noted that the cities of Mashhad, Tehran, Karaj, and Rasht have the highest numbers of house churches.<sup>58</sup>

Several Christian leaders who spoke to the Campaign reported that around 2005, coinciding with the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian government ramped up its repression of Christian house churches, Persian-language Protestant churches, and converts.<sup>59</sup> They noted that the government intensified its efforts further around 2010.<sup>60</sup>

Over the last few years, state officials and clerics who influence state policy have increasingly spoken out against the growth of evangelicalism and house churches, articulating a rationale for state repression. Since Iran’s constitution recognizes Christians as a religious minority with certain rights, and Christians

<sup>56</sup> “Minister Of Intelligence Warns Against The Formation Of Shia Zionist/Howzeh’s Elite Are Being Attacked By The CIA” (“Vazir Etelaat Onvan Kard: Hoshdar Nesbat be Sheklgiri Sahyounist shiyi/Nokhbegan Howzeh Mored Hojoum CIA Hastand”), *Mehr News*, September 23, 2010, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=1157266> (accessed July 24, 2012).

<sup>57</sup> “Exclusive/the Discovery of 200 House Churches in Mashhad” (“Ekhtesasi/Kashf 200 Kelisaye Khanegi dar Mashhad”), Javan Online, October 2, 2012, <http://www.javanonline.ir/vdcq5a5qt1azu2.cbct.html> (accessed July 24, 2012).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Executive Director Shahab Ebrahimi, Farsi Christian News Network, December 7, 2011; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji, Article 18, May 31, 2012; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Firouz Sadegh-Khanjani, January 4 and February 16, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Article 18, “Religious Freedom – Christianity,” February 2012, unpublished document on file with International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran; Article 18, “Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran,” September 2011, unpublished document on file with International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

are afforded certain protections under traditional Islamic jurisprudence as a “people of the book,”<sup>61</sup> Iranian officials and clerics try to differentiate evangelicals and house churches from Christianity. They claim that evangelicals and house churches are a deviant form of Christianity, different from state-recognized Christianity. Minister of Intelligence Heydar Moslehi said in August 2010 that “based on the information [we have] received, a Protestant current with ‘Jesus only’ mantra and support from the Zionists has begun to work in schools.”<sup>62</sup> He added that this current “should be seen as different from the recognized religious minorities in the Islamic state.”<sup>63</sup> On January 4, 2011, about a week after authorities arrested over 50 house church members in the city of Tehran, Morteza Tamaddon, governor of the Tehran province, claimed that “various deviant, false, and corrupt sects have sharpened their teeth in the realm of faith. Their actions have been observed among the youth and some [other] areas. One of these currents is a corrupt and deviant current that promotes its thoughts under the banner of Christianity by using the cultural circles operating in England.”<sup>64</sup>

More pointedly, these officials and others claim that evangelicals and the house church movement are backed by foreign enemies of the Iranian government who wish to undermine the state. Ayatollah Seyyed Hashem Hosseini Bushehri, who delivers the Friday sermon in the city of Qom, warned his followers that, “Today the global arrogance [of world powers] has invested in a detailed plan that has created a tendency towards Christianity in our country.”<sup>65</sup>

“It is a plan designed by the terrorists and spies and it is not related to the authentic Christianity,” said Hojjat Al-Islam Abbas Kaebi, a Qom seminarian and member of the influential Assembly of Experts, in October 2010. He added, “House churches work as a team; the Zionists and Westerners have targeted our society’s identity and people’s religion; they want to create crises, mislead the society and deprive them of their identity.”<sup>66</sup>

In a public address in Qom in October 2010, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei explained why the promotion of Christian house churches (as well as the Baha’i faith and Sufi or “mystic” Islam) undermines the Islamic Republic:

The two main points [of support for the state are]: religion and the people. Therefore, the enemy launches waves of attacks against them; [they attack] religion in one way and the people’s loyalty and their belief in another way. What you saw happen in the 1980s . . . whether by the outside enemy or [their] servants inside [the country], is that [they] doubted and denied the religious sanctities, the religious truths, and the Islamic proofs. This has not been accidental. They have relied on this. This problem began with the Salman Rushdie incident, through the anti-Islam Hollywood films, the [anti-Muslim] cartoons, the Quran burnings, through the different events that took place against Islam in various places. . . .

<sup>61</sup> John L. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> “The Promotion of Christianity Amongst Students,” (“Tabligh Masihiyat dar Miyan Danesh Amouzan Keshvar”), *Fars News*, August 9, 2010, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8905181239> (accessed June 26, 2012).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> “Tamaddon: The Final Blows Will Be Struck Against The Deviant Evangelicalism,” (“Tamaddon: Zarabat Nahayi be Jaryan Enherafi Tabshiri Vared Khahad Shod”), Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), January 4, 2011, <http://tehran.irna.ir/Archive.aspx?SSID=01&Section=TopNews&Page=A47> (accessed July 10, 2012).

<sup>65</sup> “The Spread Of House Churches In The Country,” (“Gostareh Kelisahaye Khanegi Dar Sathe Keshvar”), *Khabar Online*, August 12, 2010, <http://www.khabaronline.ir/news-83594.aspx> (accessed June 25, 2012).

<sup>66</sup> “House Churches Are The Zionists Arrogance Plan,” (“Kelisahaye Khanegi Barname Estekbari Sahyounisthast”), *Fars News*, October 23, 2010, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8907300494> (accessed June 25, 2012).

They [Iran's enemies] want to diminish the people's faith in Islam and those things sacred in Islam. Inside the country, using various means they [want to] shake the foundation of the faith of the people, especially the younger generation. From the spread of loose and shameless lifestyles, to the promotion of false mysticism—the fake variety of real [Islamic] mysticism—to the spread Baha'ism, to the spread of a network of house churches; these are the actions that are being undertaken today with tact and calculation and careful study by enemies of Islam. And their goal is to weaken the religion within the society.<sup>67</sup>

Abbas Kaebi, a member of the Assembly of Experts, said "The problem of house churches [is that they] are anti-religion which can be considered as against national security."<sup>68</sup> Minister of Intelligence Moslehi explained, "One of the enemy's soft war projects is to Christianize the students."<sup>69</sup>

Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani, one of Iran's most influential senior clerics, warned Iran's security officials to take action to stop Christian proselytizing. Khorasani told his advanced seminary class in March 2011:

Christianity with this [misguided] root will mislead the young Shi'as. They [in the security apparatus] fight over their own leadership and there is not a single person to tell the . . . apparatus the significance of all this misguided and misleading Christianity being promoted, even in Qom. . . . The promotion of Christianity in this country must be stopped. Otherwise, I will ruin the reputation of [the responsible party].<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, "Speech At The People's Large Gathering In Qom."

<sup>68</sup> "House Churches Are The Zionists Arrogance Plan," *Fars News*.

<sup>69</sup> "The Promotion Of Christianity Amongst Students," ("Tabligh Masihiyat dar Miyan Danesh Amouzan Keshvar"), *Fars News*, August 9, 2010, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8905181239> (accessed June 26, 2012).

<sup>70</sup> "Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani's Severe Warning" ("Hoshdar Shadid Al-Lahn Ayatollah Al-Ozma Vahid Khorasani"), *Aftab News*, March 10, 2011, <http://aftabnews.ir/vdcjy8evvuqe8mz.fsfu.html> (accessed June 25, 2012); Note: Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani is the father-in-law of the head of the judiciary, Sadegh Larijani, and it is sometimes assumed that he has notable influence over his son-and-law; See "Ayatollah Vahid's Speech is an Important Event," *Radio Zamaneh*, December 31, 2010.

## INTERNATIONAL AND IRANIAN LAW ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Iran is obligated to respect freedom of religion under both international and domestic law.

Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”<sup>71</sup>

This right to freedom of religion is twofold. It encompasses both the right to hold a particular religious belief (or to not believe) and the right to manifest that belief.<sup>72</sup> According to the UN Human Rights Committee, the body charged with implementing the ICCPR, Article 18 encompasses freedom of thought on all matters, personal conviction and the commitment to religion or belief.<sup>73</sup> Article 18 also encompasses the right to “prepare and distribute religious texts or publications” and the right to build places of worship, according to the Committee.<sup>74</sup> The Human Rights Committee also expressly states:

Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant

<sup>71</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No.16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Iran in 1975, art. 18(1).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 22, the Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4 (1993), para. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., para. 4.

religious community.<sup>75</sup>

Measures systematically taken by the Iranian government that restrict the free practice or manifestation of religion, such as closing churches, confiscating bibles, arresting church leaders, threatening churchgoers, or criminalizing evangelism, run contrary to the ICCPR.

Article 18 ensures the “right to retain one’s religion or belief,” as well as the right to adopt a new religion (i.e. to convert).<sup>76</sup> The Human Rights Committee notes that Article 18 is intended to prohibit “the use of threat of physical force or penal sanctions to compel believers or non-believers to adhere to their religious beliefs and congregations, to recant their religion or belief or to convert.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, measures taken by Iran to restrict conversion to Christianity, or any religion, or to coerce conversion or return to Islam, is prohibited under the ICCPR.

Iran’s constitution, to varying degrees, enshrines many of the human rights protections found in the IC-CPR. Article 12 of the constitution states that the “official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja’fari school, and this principle will remain eternally immutable.”<sup>78</sup> However, Article 12 grants “full respect” and free religious practice to Sunni Muslims, who observe other major schools of Islam,<sup>79</sup> and Article 13 recognizes “Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians” as religious minorities, stating, “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.”<sup>80</sup>

These religious minorities are also granted the freedom to form associations, such as churches, under Article 26 of the constitution.<sup>81</sup> Article 23 protects the freedom of opinion and the privacy of opinion, stating, “The investigation of individuals’ beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief.”<sup>82</sup>

In practice, however, Iran does not uphold these international and constitutional protections for its Christian community. (And unrecognized religions, such as the Baha’i faith, do not even have these *de facto* protections.)

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., para. 2.

<sup>76</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 22, the Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4 (1993), para. 5.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979, art. 12.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

## PERSECUTION OF PROTESTANT CONVERTS

*In Iran, when you leave Islam for any other religion, you are identified as an apostate and, as the Iranian saying goes, your blood is haram (spoiled) and you can be executed.*

—Davoud Rostami, 29-year-old convert from Karaj

Nearly every Protestant convert in Iran faces some impediment to their right to freely choose and practice their religion. From apostasy charges that threaten the life of converts—to arrests and detentions of active church members involved in proselytizing—authorities have engaged in a pattern of human rights abuses that effectively criminalizes faith and manifestations of it. Harassment and monitoring of church groups are common, as government ministries place suffocating restrictions on forming churches and distributing Christian literature, including the Bible, in Persian. Consequently, many Iranian Christians, namely converts, including most of the individuals interviewed for this report, have fled the country seeking protection from past or future persecution as refugees.<sup>83</sup>

The following section discusses the persecution of Protestant converts in terms of various categories of human rights abuses. *En masse* all these rights violation signify a multi-tiered assault on the freedom of religion for Protestants by the Iranian government.

### Violations of the Right to Life

Violations of the right to life are the most serious human rights abuse Protestant Christians face in Iran. The lives of converts are particularly at risk because some religious authorities view apostasy as a criminal offense punishable by death.

Violations of Christians' right to life have generally taken one of two forms in Iran. The first is a judicial

<sup>83</sup> Omid Advocates for Human Rights, Report on the Situation of Iranian Refugees in Turkey, June 2010, <http://www.omidadvocates.org/resources--reports.html> (accessed September 4, 2012).

criminal conviction for apostasy, followed by execution by the state. This form is rare: only one case of implementation has been clearly documented, that of the pastor Hossein Soodmand in 1990. Nevertheless, the threat of execution for apostasy is frequently invoked by authorities to pressure Christians to cease their religious practices.

The second form is the murder of Protestants by unknown assailants, with the subsequent investigation marked by a lack of due diligence that suggests government complicity in the murder or cover up.

### *Apostasy as a Crime*

Apostasy, the act of abandoning or renouncing one's religion, is not codified as a crime under Iran's Islamic penal code or any other Iranian law. However, law enforcement, prosecutors, and courts generally treat the act as a crime. In order to circumvent the lack of a codified prohibition of apostasy, prosecutors and judges invoke legal provisions in the Iranian constitution that allow courts to utilize Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>84</sup>

Iranian courts typically draw on jurisprudence that views the act of leaving Islam for any another religion, including variants of Islam not recognized by the state, as a capital crime; a person convicted of the act must be executed.<sup>85</sup> A person can only be an apostate, these interpretations hold, if changing religion after puberty—age 9 for females, 15 for males. Before puberty one can choose a new religion freely. If one does not choose he or she automatically adopts the religion of their father.<sup>86</sup> Some theologians and courts have allowed defendants to repent and renounce their new faith to avoid this sentence.<sup>87</sup>

This interpretation of Islamic law is not universally agreed upon.<sup>88</sup> On a few occasions, lawyers have tried to invoke Islamic jurisprudence from high-ranking Shi'a clerics who take more lenient views of apostasy.<sup>89</sup> For example, some clerics have issued edicts stating that leaving Islam without animus to the faith is not apostasy, or that converting to another recognized religion is not apostasy.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>84</sup> See Judgment in the Case of Youcef Nadarkhani, 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit Criminal Court of Appeals for the Gilan Province, Case No. 8809981314800697, September 22, 2010, [www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/12/khanjani-nadarkhani-apostasy/](http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/12/khanjani-nadarkhani-apostasy/) (accessed July 24, 2012); Note: In this ruling, the judge referred to Article 167 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 3 of the Civil Section of the Code of Procedure for Public and Revolutionary Courts, and Article 105 of the Islamic penal code, allowing rulings to be based on Shiite jurisprudence in the absence of relevant codified law.

<sup>85</sup> See Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Tahrir Al-Wasilah*, Trans. Seyyed Mohammad Bagher Mousavi Hamedani [http://vccans.ir/libraray/Ketab-khaneh/ketaabkhaaneh/tahrirolwasyla\\_imam\\_khomeini/tahrirolwasyla\\_imam\\_khomeini\\_jeld\\_4\\_18.html#link101](http://vccans.ir/libraray/Ketab-khaneh/ketaabkhaaneh/tahrirolwasyla_imam_khomeini/tahrirolwasyla_imam_khomeini_jeld_4_18.html#link101) (accessed July 24, 2012); Religious opinion of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence with member of the Church of Iran, December 2009, unpublished on file with International Campaign for Human Rights.

<sup>86</sup> Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Tahrir Al-Wasilah*, Trans. Seyyed Mohammad Bagher Mousavi Hamedani; Religious opinion of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence with member of the Church of Iran, January 2010, unpublished on file with International Campaign for Human Rights; Shirin Ebadi, *The Rights of the Child: A Study of Legal Aspects of Children's Rights in Iran*, Trans. M. Zaimaran (Tehran: UNICEF, 1994).

<sup>87</sup> Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Tahrir Al-Wasilah*, Trans. Seyyed Mohammad Bagher Mousavi Hamedani; Religious opinion of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence with member of the Church of Iran, December 2009, unpublished on file with International Campaign for Human Rights; See Judgment in the Case of Youcef Nadarkhani, 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit Criminal Court of Appeals for the Gilan Province, Case No. 8809981314800697, September 22, 2010, [www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/12/khanjani-nadarkhani-apostasy/](http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/12/khanjani-nadarkhani-apostasy/) (accessed July 24, 2012).

<sup>88</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mahmoud Taravatrooy, Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani's lawyer, September 14, 2011.

<sup>89</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mahmoud Taravatrooy; See Religious opinion of Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence, October 2009, (on file with ICHRI); Religious opinion of Ayatollah Mousavi Ardabili regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence, (on file with ICHRI); Religious opinion of Ayatollah Gerami regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence, October 2009, (on file with ICHRI).

<sup>90</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mahmoud Taravatrooy, Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani's lawyer, September 14,

“We asked some top clerics to issue opinions on [apostasy under Islam],” Mahmoud Taravatrooy, a lawyer for Christian pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani, who faced an eventually dropped apostasy charge in 2010, told the Campaign. “Four Ayatollahs [including the late Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri] said that changing one’s religion from Islam to one of the Abrahamic religions [which includes Christianity] is not construed as apostasy, and [the convert] should be treated the same way as people of other religions would be.”<sup>91</sup>

However, according to Taravatrooy, judges usually reject these arguments, relying instead on jurisprudence from more conservative clerics.<sup>92</sup> Iranian courts almost universally rely on the Islamic Republic’s founding leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s *Tahrir Al-Wasilah*, a collection of jurisprudence that holds more stringent views on apostasy.<sup>93</sup>

In 2008, the Judiciary introduced a draft of a new Islamic penal code in Iran’s Parliament (or “Majlis”). The bill would have codified apostasy as a capital crime.<sup>94</sup> However, following international criticism over the apostasy and other provisions, lawmakers did not bring the bill up for a vote.<sup>95</sup> In a preliminary Parliamentary vote on the new penal code in December 2011, which at this writing awaits final approval, apostasy was not part of the law and remained uncoded.<sup>96</sup> However, the pending penal code includes a provision, referring to Article 167 of the Iranian constitution, which explicitly instructs judges to utilize Islamic legal sources where crimes or punishments are not covered by the code.<sup>97</sup> Rights groups have expressed concern that such a provision opens the door to more apostasy cases.<sup>98</sup> It should be noted that regardless of codification in Iranian law, criminalizing the choice of religion violates international law.

### Apostasy Cases

Since 1979, officials have on occasion charged religious converts with apostasy and prosecutors have pursued the charges in criminal court. In a few known cases, judges have convicted apostasy defendants. However, most apostasy charges examined by the Campaign have not led to trials and convictions are rare. The Campaign has been able to document three cases of Christians charged with apostasy (those of Mehdi Dibaj, Youcef Nadarkhani, and Hossein Soodmand), and one documented case in which the

---

2011.

<sup>91</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Unprecedented Death Sentence for Christian Pastor on Charge of Apostasy,” December 7, 2010, [www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/12/khanjani-nadarkhani-apostasy/](http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/12/khanjani-nadarkhani-apostasy/) (accessed July 24, 2012).

<sup>92</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mahmoud Taravatrooy, Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani’s lawyer, September 14, 2011.

<sup>93</sup> See Judgment in the Case of Youcef Nadarkhani, 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit Criminal Court of Appeals for the Gilan Province, Case No. 8809981314800697, September 22, 2010 [www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/12/khanjani-nadarkhani-apostasy/](http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/12/khanjani-nadarkhani-apostasy/) (accessed July 24, 2012); Judgment in the Case of Behnam Irani, 30<sup>th</sup> Circuit Appeal Court of Tehran Province, Case No. 917/30/86, February 23, 2008, on file with International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran; See Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Tahrir Al-Wasilah*, Trans. Seyyed Mohammad Bagher Mousavi Hamedani [http://vccans.ir/library/Ketabkhaneh/ketaabkhaaneh/tahrirolwasyla\\_imam\\_khomeini/tahrirolwasyla\\_imam\\_khomeini\\_jeld\\_4\\_18.html#link101](http://vccans.ir/library/Ketabkhaneh/ketaabkhaaneh/tahrirolwasyla_imam_khomeini/tahrirolwasyla_imam_khomeini_jeld_4_18.html#link101) (accessed July 24, 2012).

<sup>94</sup> International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), *IRAN/death Penalty: A State Terror Policy*, April 2009, [www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/Rapport\\_Iran\\_final.pdf](http://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/Rapport_Iran_final.pdf) (accessed August 3, 2012).

<sup>95</sup> UN General Assembly, Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Sixty-third session, 2008); UN General Assembly, Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly, U.N. Doc. A/63/430/Add.3 and Corr.1.

<sup>96</sup> Iranian Penal Code, *the Guardian Council*, 2009, <http://www.shora-gc.ir/Portal/Home/ShowPage.aspx?Object=NEWS&ID=97b9be00-f413-435f-b4c4-1cedf633ac1c&WebPartID=eaaaa1e1-efd7-4bf9-91cd-e8154ab52c31&CategoryID=e2beada8-28bd-4ff4-a9f8-84d4ee0a2973> (accessed August 1, 2012).

<sup>97</sup> New Islamic Penal Code of Iran, art. 220; Human Rights Watch, *Iran: Codifying Repression: An Assessment of Iran’s New Penal Code*, August 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/08/28/codifying-repression> (accessed September 4, 2012).

<sup>98</sup> HRW, *Iran: Codifying Repression*.



Christian was executed by the state (that of Hossein Soodmand). Some Christian websites have alleged that authorities hanged two Christian men in Evin Prison in 2007 for apostasy; however, the Campaign has not been able to confirm whether these executions occurred nor establish any further details.

It should also be noted that not all apostasy cases involve Christians. For example, Abdolreza Gharabat, from the southern province of Khuzestan, was executed on January 26, 2011 in Karoon Prison in Ahvaz for apostasy and “encouraging corruption.” The basis of Gharabat’s charge was that he allegedly claimed that he was the Twelfth Imam (the messiah of Twelver Shi’a Islam) and God, and began to accrue followers.<sup>99</sup>

Moreover, in at least four trials reviewed by the Campaign, the judge urged prosecutors to pursue apostasy convictions against defendants even though the matter was not before the court. For example, in his February 2008 ruling convicting Pastor Behnam Irani of “acting against national security,” Judge Bigdeli of Branch 30 of the Appeals Court of Tehran Province wrote:

Noting that according to the clear confessions of the defendant during judicial proceedings, he stated his parents are Muslims, and he himself after reaching puberty practiced Islam and then exited the sacred religion of Islam and became a Christian. Also that he has deceived several people and prepared them to exit Islam. Thus, considering [the religious opinion] as relayed [by Ayatollah Khomeini] in Tahrir Al-Wasilah, the defendant

Pastor Behnam Irani was convicted of “acting against national security.” In his trial, the judge pressed for an apostasy charge as well.

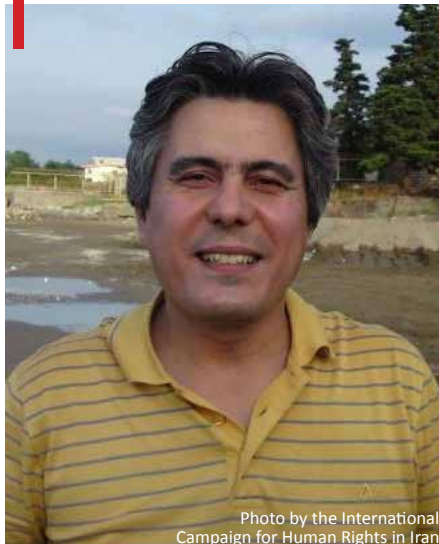


Photo by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran

is certainly an innate apostate. The sentencing of innate apostasy is murder. . . . Therefore, the statement of the respected Magistrate of the case on 12 March 2007, expressing lack of apostasy in the case, is incorrect and not in accordance with Sharia and legal standards. This charge has not been noted by the prosecutor either. . . . Thus, this court remarks that it is necessary that a [new] case regarding the above-mentioned charge [apostasy] follow legal procedures.<sup>100</sup>

In December 1990, authorities executed Hossein Soodmand, a pastor from Mashhad, for apostasy, evangelizing to Muslims, and pastoring a church for converts from Islam. Soodmand had converted from Islam to Christianity in 1960, when he was 13 years old.<sup>101</sup> “He was held in prison for one month,” explained his daughter Rashin Soodmand.<sup>102</sup> “Then the religious police released him without explanation and without apology. We were overjoyed. We thought his ordeal was over.”<sup>103</sup> Six months later, in Oc-

<sup>99</sup> Khuzestan Provincial Court House, “Implantation of Execution Sentence in Ahvaz,” (“Ejraye Hokme Edam dar Ahvaz”), February 3, 2011, <http://www.dadgostari-khz.ir/tabid/65/ctl/Edit/mid/399/Code/1048/Default.aspx> (accessed July 25, 2012); Note: Fars News Agency reported that Gharabat was charged with apostasy, according to Articles 513, 639 and 640 of the Islamic penal code, and was sentenced to death, <http://farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8911111212>, (accessed July 25, 2012).

<sup>100</sup> Judgment in the Case of Behnam Irani, 30<sup>th</sup> Circuit Appeal Court of Tehran Province, Case No. 917/30/86, February 23, 2008, on file with International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

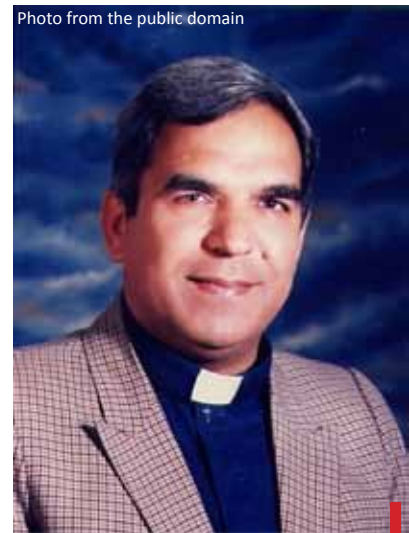
<sup>101</sup> “Hanged for Being a Christian in Iran,” *The Telegraph*, October 11, 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/3179465/Hanged-for-being-a-Christian-in-Iran.html>, (accessed July 25, 2012); Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, <http://www.iranrights.org/english/document-182.php> (accessed July 25, 2012).

<sup>102</sup> “Hanged for Being a Christian in Iran,” *The Telegraph*.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

tober 1990, authorities re-arrested Soodmand.<sup>104</sup> Authorities reportedly demanded that he renounce his Christian faith and the church in which he was a pastor, or face execution.<sup>105</sup> “Of course, my father refused to give up his faith,” said Rashin.<sup>106</sup> “He could not renounce his God. His belief in Christ was his life—it was his deepest conviction.”<sup>107</sup> Two months later, on December 3, authorities hung Hossein Soodmand; it is not known where he was tried.<sup>108</sup> Rashin Soodmand told the Campaign her family did not know whether her father ever had a trial and was not informed of the execution till after it took place.<sup>109</sup>

In December 1993, a judge in the northern province of Mazandaran sentenced Mehdi Dibaj, a convert and pastor for an Assembly of God congregation in Mashhad, to death on the charge of apostasy, but he was released after his case gained international attention. Authorities had arrested Dibaj in 1984, detaining him in Sari Prison until January 1994.<sup>110</sup> He allegedly spent two years in solitary confinement and faced torture while in detention.<sup>111</sup>



Reverend Hossein Soodmand was executed for apostasy on December 3, 1990.

A copy of Dibaj’s execution order was leaked to Tehran-based pastor Haik Hovsepian, who then launched an international campaign to push for the sentence to be overturned.<sup>112</sup> He invited the UN special representative for human rights to come to Iran and investigate violations of religious freedom.<sup>113</sup> Hovsepian provided detailed reports to the international press.<sup>114</sup> As a result, foreign MPs, church leaders, human rights organizations, the EU, and the US House of Representatives urged Iran to release Dibaj.<sup>115</sup> On 16 January 1994 Dibaj was released from death row and prison.<sup>116</sup> However, in July 1994, his body was found in a forest in Karaj. Those behind his killing were never officially identified.<sup>117</sup> Hovsepian himself was also found killed in 1994 (see next section for details).

After Dibaj’s release, authorities largely refrained from pursuing apostasy convictions against Christian converts for over a decade. From October 2009 till August 2012, however, pastor Youcef Nadarkhani faced possible execution for apostasy.

Nadarkhani, a 34-year old pastor, led an approximately 400-person congregation in the northern city of Rasht.<sup>118</sup> Born to Muslim parents, Nadarkhani converted to Christianity at the age of 19.<sup>119</sup> Nadarkhani’s

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, <http://www.iranrights.org/english/document-182.php> (accessed July 25, 2012).

<sup>106</sup> “Hanged for Being a Christian in Iran,” *The Telegraph*.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*.

<sup>109</sup> “Hanged for Being a Christian in Iran,” *The Telegraph*.

<sup>110</sup> Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, *One Person’s Story: Mr. Mehdi Dibaj*, <http://www.iranrights.org/english/memorial-case-12920.php> (accessed July 25, 2012).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Andreh Hovsepian and Joseph Hovsepian, *A Cry from Iran* (2007), DVD.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Amnesty International, *Iran: Official Secrecy Hides Continuing Repression*, May 30, 1995, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/002/1995/en/d8efd97a-eb63-11dd-b8d6-03683db9c805/mde130021995en.html> (accessed July 25, 2012).

<sup>117</sup> Andreh Hovsepian and Joseph Hovsepian, *A Cry from Iran* (2007), DVD.

<sup>118</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Unprecedented Death Sentence for Christian Pastor on Charge of Apostasy.”

<sup>119</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Supreme Court Says No Apostasy Execution if Pastor was Never Muslim and Repents,” July

congregation is part of a larger Protestant evangelical group called the Church of Iran. Local intelligence officers began monitoring Nadarkhani and his activities consistently sometime around 2004, if not earlier, summoning him for interrogations on numerous occasions.<sup>120</sup>

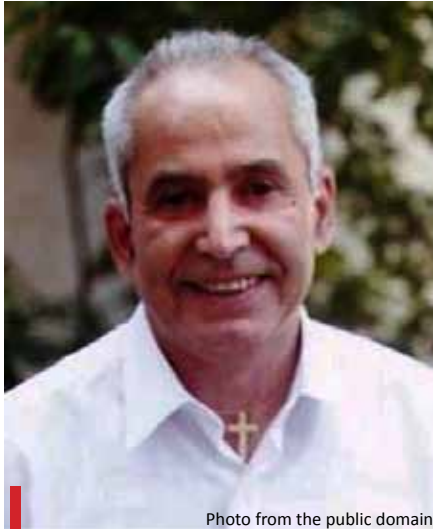


Photo from the public domain

On June 23, 1994, Pastor Mehdi Dibaj was walking to attend his daughter's birthday celebrations when he was kidnapped, driven to the outskirts of Tehran, and stabbed to death.

In October 2009, authorities arrested Nadarkhani, eventually charging him with apostasy.<sup>121</sup> A lower court in Gilan sentenced him to death, and on 22 September 2010, the 11th Branch of the Criminal Court of Appeals for Gilan Province upheld the death sentence.<sup>122</sup> During the appeal, Nadarkhani insisted that prior to his conversion he was never a practicing and believing Muslim and therefore could not have been an apostate.<sup>123</sup>

Nadarkhani filed an appeal with the Supreme Court of Qom Province, which ruled that the lower criminal court and the appeals courts did not adequately establish the factual basis and remanded the case to the Eleventh Branch of the Criminal Court of Gilan Province for a more rigorous factual investigation.<sup>124</sup>

The Supreme Court ruled that if Nadarkhani was a Muslim after the age of maturity, then the lower court must find him guilty of apostasy and issue a death sentence, but if not, then he could repent and renounce his Christianity. Repentance would mean release and avoidance of the death sentence.<sup>125</sup>

Nadarkhani's lawyer Mohammad Ali Dadkhah told the Campaign that during the three-day September 2011 retrial, "The judge kept asking my client to say, 'I have renounced Christianity and I recognize Islam as rescinder of all other religions,' and he kept saying 'I won't say that.'"<sup>126</sup>

Nadarkhani's retrial was international news, garnering public and behind-the-scenes calls for his release from the United Nations, the European Union, Amnesty International and the Vatican.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>120</sup> 26, 2011, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/07/nadarkhani-no-execution-if-not-muslim-and-repents/> (accessed July 25, 2012).

<sup>121</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Reza (Davoud) Nejetsabet, April 5, 2011.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "Unprecedented Death Sentence for Christian Pastor on Charge of Apostasy." Note: In its verdict, the appeals court stated that during interrogations Nadarkhani had made a written confession admitting he left Islam for Christianity. But at his trial, Nadarkhani said that after repeated questioning, "My interrogator coaxed me [into thinking] that a person who is born to Muslim parents and does not accept a religion other than Islam before reaching the religious maturity age [15 for males] is automatically a Muslim."

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "Supreme Court Says No Apostasy Execution if Pastor was Never Muslim and Repents."

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "Nadarkhani Refuses to Repent; Awaiting Final Ruling on Apostasy Death Sentence," September 29, 2011, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/09/nadarkhani-repentance-2/> (accessed July 25, 2012). Note: Dadkhah also explained to the Campaign (regarding the retrial) that the "appeals court death sentence had already been sent to the Supreme Court and as it lacked legal and logical justification, it was eliminated. But the Supreme Court wanted them to get a statement of repentance from him, [stipulating] that if he does not repent, he should be executed. I said in the court that from the point of view of our country's laws, Islamic spirituality, and jurists such as Montazeri, Ardabili, and Saanei, demanding repentance is not legally valid. We had solicited specific opinions about this case from these [clerics]. I told the court that from the standpoint of international law accepted by our own country, this [demanding repentance] is not legal."

<sup>128</sup> Michele Chabin, "Possible Development in Youcef Nadarkhani Case," *National Catholic Register*, October 11, 2011, <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/iran-sets-retrial-for-christian-pastor-youcef-nadarkhani/> (accessed July 25, 2012); "Statement by the Spokesperson of the EU High Representative Catherine Ashton on the Case of Youcef Nadarkhani," A 82/12, February 24, 2012, [www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/128146.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/128146.pdf) (accessed July 25, 2012); Amnesty International, *Iranian Christian Pastor Accused of 'Apostasy' Must be Released*, September 30, 2011, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/iranian-christian-pastor-accused-apostasy-must-be-released-2011-09-30> (accessed July 25, 2012); Note: Shortly after this trial, on September 30, 2011, the semi-official Fars News Agency inac-

In December 2011 the Iranian judiciary issued an order to Rasht court to delay the apostasy verdict.<sup>128</sup> Dadkhah noted that there is no basis in the law for such a delay.<sup>129</sup>

Dadkhah was himself sentenced to an eight-year prison term in July 2011 for his membership in the Defenders of Human Rights Center.<sup>130</sup>

On September 8, 2012, authorities acquitted Nadarkhani on apostasy charges, instead sentencing him during a single hearing to three years in prison for charges linked to evangelizing and then releasing him on time served.<sup>131</sup>

### *Suspicious Deaths*

In the years following the 1979 Revolution, unidentified assailants assassinated several prominent Iranian Protestants, including Reverend Arastoo Sayah and Bahram Dehghani, and attempted to assassinate Anglican Bishop Hassan Dehghani, Bahram's father, according to media sources and Christian rights groups.<sup>132</sup>



Photo from the public domain  
Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani was sentenced to death for apostasy in 2010; his sentence was overturned in 2012.

In 1994, after the release of Mehdi Dibaj, another string of assassinations by unidentified assailants occurred. Haik Hovsepian, who had been Dibaj's public advocate, was killed, followed by Dibaj himself, and then pastor Tateos Mikaelian.

Hovsepian, pastor for the Central Assembly of God Church in Tehran and Chairman of the Council of Protestant Ministers, disappeared three days after he helped secure Dibaj's release on January 19, 1994, while on his way to Tehran's Mehrabad International Airport.<sup>133</sup> His family, friends, and followers wrote letters to several Iranian government officials asking for information on his whereabouts; every reply claimed no knowledge. After 11 days, authorities contacted the family and said they had found a body they believed to be Hovsepian. His son Joseph went to the morgue in the town of Shahr-Rey outside Tehran, where he identified a photo as the body of his murdered father.<sup>134</sup> He had 26 stab wounds and a gash 10 centimeters in diameter over his heart.<sup>135</sup>

Those behind this killing were never officially identified.<sup>136</sup> The regime blamed Iranian opposition groups,

---

curately claimed that Nadarkhani's charges were actually "rape" and "repeated extortion." Another Fars News article from the same day quoted Gholamali Rezvani, Gilan Province's Political-Security Deputy Governor, as saying, "Youcef Nadarkhani has security crimes and he had set up a house of corruption" and not apostasy. See: International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "After Trial on Apostasy Charge, Christian Pastor Nadarkhani Accused of Rape and Extortion," October 1, 2011, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/10/nadarkhani-gilan/> (July 25, 2012).

<sup>128</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "Apostasy Verdict Delayed So Pastor Can Repent," December 20, 2011, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/12/nadarkhani-delay/> (accessed July 25, 2012).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Amnesty International, "Iran must quash human rights lawyer's conviction ahead of prison term," May 4, 2012 (accessed July 4, 2012).

<sup>131</sup> Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Iranian Christian pastor released from jail," *The Guardian*, September 8, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/08/iranian-christian-pastor-released-jail> (accessed September 10, 2012).

<sup>132</sup> Richard Harries, "The Rt Rev Hass Dehqani-Tafti," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2008, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/may/21/anglicanism.iran](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/may/21/anglicanism.iran) (accessed July 25, 2012); Article 18, "Religious Freedom – Christianity," February 2012, unpublished document on file with International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran; Andreh Hovsepian and Joseph Hovsepian, *A Cry from Iran* (2007), DVD.

<sup>133</sup> Amnesty International, *Iran: Official Secrecy*.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Andreh Hovsepian and Joseph Hovsepian, *A Cry from Iran* (2007), DVD.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

claiming these organizations assassinated Hovsepian to make the regime look bad internationally.<sup>137</sup>

Joseph Hovsepian spoke with the Campaign in April 2012 about the events surrounding his father's murder. He explained that the investigation of his father's initial disappearance did not appear to follow standard procedures.

We never came face to face with a person that the government said this is the person who did it. I was personally, for 11 or 12 days, running around trying to find out where my father was [after his disappearance]. We later found out that my father was killed the very first day, within a few hours of when he left for the airport. His body was found in Shahr-Rey in the very south of Tehran, a one-hour drive from where we lived.

Within a few hours [of his death] everything had been taken care of. Authorities found and took his body and within a few days they buried him.

All of this, given it involves several different government departments, raises questions. On one side . . . a body is found . . . then the body goes to the morgue and in a few days the morgue is told to get rid of it [and the body is buried].

On the other side, human rights groups, the UN, my family, newspapers, hospitals, all of them are making a big fuss about this pastor who is missing. Normally in Iran if a person is missing they will keep an [unidentified] body for about six to eight weeks—at least at that time, that was, according to my research, what was done. Normally they would publish a missing person's name in the newspaper several times. None of this was part of the process they did for my dad.<sup>138</sup>

Joseph Hovsepian told the Campaign that his family found it hard to believe that it took the police nearly two weeks to realize that the body they had found and buried was the “missing pastor everyone was talking about.” The family believes these irregularities pointed to gross negligence or intentional mishandling of the investigation. Joseph Hovsepian told the Campaign that he believed it was likely authorities knew that his father's body belonged to the missing Christian pastor.<sup>139</sup>

Joseph Hovsepian also told the Campaign that the local police seemed to have a limited role in the investigation into his father's death, but that his family never had contact with other security agencies looking into the case.

At the Shahr-Rey police they would speak as if [the investigation] was out of their control. They [also] didn't have the [case file]. They said this folder had to be handled differently and another department had to take this case. Later I learned that [the Ministry of] Intelligence held my father's case file since it was flagged “high profile.”<sup>140</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Amnesty International, *Iran: Official Secrecy*; Andreh Hovsepian and Joseph Hovsepian, *A Cry from Iran* (2007), DVD.

<sup>138</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Joseph Hovsepian, April 19, 2012.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. Joseph told the Campaign, “When we went to the police they said it was a ‘failure of police coordination.’ We talked to the Afghani man who saw the body. What was interesting is that this guy was just a farmer and illiterate but he said, ‘I found the cross on the ID in his pocket which was full of blood.’ He said ‘I realized that he was a religious man.’ So an illiterate Afghani farmer knew that this was a Christian man here. In Iran there are not that many Christians or Armenians. So you have one man who is [missing], and there is a whole country looking for him, and the government gives the story that they couldn't find the family [of a body found by this Afghani man]. These things don't fit together.” He added that even the police indicated that they knew who he was when they found him.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

Joseph Hovsepian added that he had learned through sources within Iran's security agencies that his father "was held at Evin the very first day he disappeared."<sup>141</sup> The Campaign was not able to corroborate this allegation. He stated:

In all, they said they are doing a formal investigation but they said they couldn't find a specific suspect. In general, they just said there are people that want to make Iran look bad to the other nations. So they would say Mojahedin-e Khalq and other groups did it. They never arrested anybody.<sup>142</sup>

According to Joseph Hovsepian, his father's disappearance came at a time when the government was extremely concerned with Hovsepian's activities.

The Dibaj case brought a lot of tension between the government and my dad; they were not pleased with his involvement in the case. At the same time, they were saying our church had to close, but my dad said, "We won't close the church; whoever wants to come to the church is welcome." Then they said to him, "OK, next Friday we will come to the church and whoever is there will be arrested or killed." That's when my dad said to the congregation, during a Friday session, "Next week don't come to church unless you have written your will and said goodbyes to your family." Then, interestingly, more people than average came to church the next week. The police were also there but they were not able to do anything. All of this was heading towards showing the government that my dad was not the type of person to bow down.

In what was probably one of his very last interrogations, the Intelligence people were saying, "We are watching you very closely, your phones and every movement are controlled."<sup>143</sup>

About six months after Hovsepian's death, on July 2, 1994, Reverend Tateos Mikaelian, a 62-year-old Protestant Armenian Christian, was found dead, reportedly shot several times in the head.<sup>144</sup> Mikaelian had become the Chair of the Council of Protestants after Hovsepian's death.<sup>145</sup> A note and address were found on Mikaelian's body that led to Dibaj's body.<sup>146</sup>

According to the official police statement, authorities found Dibaj's body on July 5, 1994, after investigating Mikaelian's disappearance.<sup>147</sup> He had reportedly not been seen since June 24 of that year.<sup>148</sup>

On July 7, 1994, the Iranian government publicly accused three women, members of the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) opposition group, of the murder of Mikaelian and Dibaj.<sup>149</sup> Authorities claimed that one of the women, Farahnaz Anami, confessed in front of journalists and a representative of Iran's religious



Photo from the public domain

In January 1994, Bishop Haik Hovsepian-Mehr suddenly went missing. A few days later his son was called to the mortuary to identify his father's body.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Amnesty International, *Iran: Official Secrecy*; Andreh Hovsepian and Joseph Hovsepian, *A Cry from Iran* (2007), DVD.

<sup>145</sup> Amnesty International, *Iran: Official Secrecy*.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

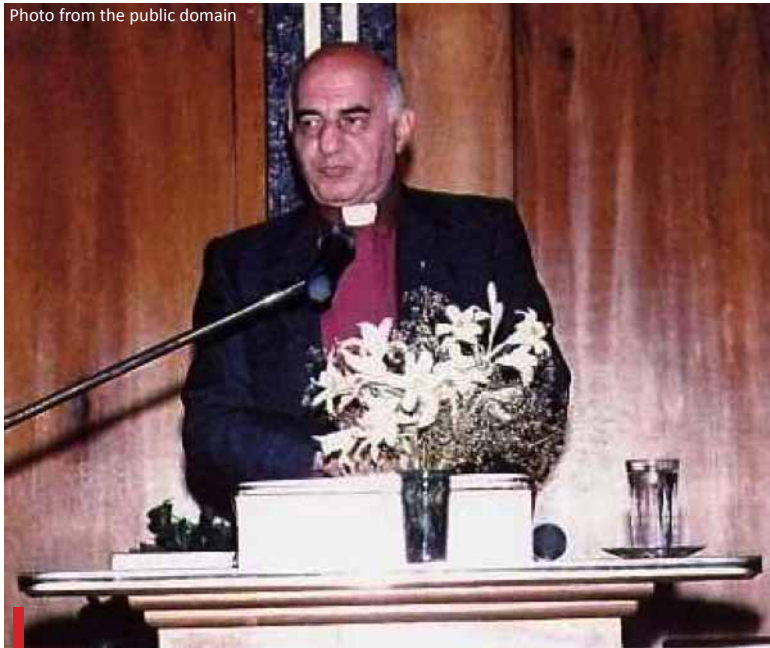


Photo from the public domain

Reverend Tateos Mikaelian, a Presbyterian Church leader, was shot dead in an apartment by unknown assailants on June 1994.

minorities to participation in the murders.<sup>150</sup> The government prosecuted the women in a public trial before the Revolutionary Court in March 1995.<sup>151</sup> At the hearing, the women confessed to the murder of Mikaelian. The women's confessions, emphasizing their connection to the MEK, were televised.<sup>152</sup>

Iranian investigative journalist Akbar Ganji alleges in his book *The Red Eminence and The Grey Eminences* that the murders of Christian pastors during the 1990s, including Mikaelian, were part of a series of extrajudicial killings by members of the Ministry of Intelligence called the "serial killings."<sup>153</sup> These killings resulted in the deaths of dozens of intellectuals and political figures and were only uncovered by Ganji with the assistance

of an unnamed whistleblower from inside the Ministry.<sup>154</sup>

Ganji asserts that, "whether Sunni, Christian, Communist, or Shi'a, for [certain government elites] intellectuals were the source of an information war from the West and must be killed," adding that Pastor Mikaelian was an important and reputable theologian.<sup>155</sup> Ganji also challenges the culpability of the three MEK members who were convicted in the killings of Mikaelian and Dibaj. He added that Saeed Emami, the Intelligence Ministry official alleged to have directly overseen the serial killings, sometimes coordinated with the MEK and at other times blamed them for acts his team committed.<sup>156</sup>

After the serial killings were exposed, authorities arrested Saeed Emami in 1999, alleging he had, in effect, "gone rogue" and acted without authorization.<sup>157</sup> Ganji reflects that "in the killing of Christian pastors, a ridiculous scenario was played out and that scenario could not have been played without the knowledge of [the Minister] himself" and possibly the president. In June 1999 Saeed Emami allegedly committed suicide in prison.<sup>158</sup>

According to the Christian rights group Article 18, there have been other suspicious deaths of Christian

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> HRW, *Iran: Religious and Ethnic Minorities*.

<sup>153</sup> Akbar Ganji, *The Red Eminence and The Grey Eminences ("Alijanab-i Surkhpush va Alijanaban-i Khakistari: Asibshinasi-i Guzar Bih Dawlat-i Dimokratik Tawsi'ahgara")* (Tarh-i Naw, 2000).

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> "Suicide of Iran Intelligence Agent Reported," *New York Times*, June 21, 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/06/21/world/suicide-of-iran-intelligence-agent-reported.html> (accessed August 3, 2012).

leaders in Iran, including that of Reverend Mohammad Bagher Yousefi, reportedly found hung from a tree in September 28, 1996 in Northern Iran, and Pastor Ghorban Tourani, a house church leader, whose throat was allegedly cut in front of his home in 2005.<sup>159</sup>

### *Threats to Life*

The execution of Soodmand, and the assassinations of Christians leaders like Hovsepian, Mikaelian and others serve as a public warning to all Christians to avoid public displays of religion and evangelizing. Adding to this, Iranian Protestants are also subjected to death threats. Twelve Christians told the Campaign that Iranian authorities had directly threatened their life. On some occasions, judicial or security officers allegedly threatened Christians with apostasy charges and execution, and on other occasions threatened that they would kill them extrajudicially. Such threats often came during arrests, interrogations or detentions. Reza (Davoud) Nejatsabet described the effect of threats he experienced while detained by the Ministry of Intelligence:

I didn't experience physical torture, as in them beating me. But the psychological torture was intense. They said, "You're executable, we'll kill you." This is a horrid form of torture, for someone to say to you every day that they will kill you.

When I was walking in the streets after my release, I always had an intolerable fear that they would murder me, not execute me after a trial, but murder me. Concoct a scheme where they hit me with a car. They have done these things. They have killed pastors in the past. They killed Mehdi Dibaj this way. We even have execution. They executed Pastor Hossein Soodmand. Now they have sentenced Pastor Nadarkhani to death. These are forms of psychological pressure.<sup>160</sup>

### **Arbitrary Arrest and Detention in International Law**

International law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention. As a State Party to the ICCPR, Iran has pledged to uphold Article 9, which states: "No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention. No one shall be deprived of his liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law."<sup>161</sup> Moreover, "anyone who is arrested shall be informed, at the time of arrest, of the reasons for his arrest and shall be promptly informed of any charges against him."<sup>162</sup> The right of those deprived of their liberty to challenge before a court the lawfulness of their detention is central to Article 9.

There are three categories of arbitrary detention, as enumerated by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention: (1) "When it is clearly impossible to invoke any legal basis justifying the deprivation of liberty (as when a person is kept in detention after the completion of his sentence or despite an amnesty law applicable to him)"; (2) "When the deprivation of liberty results from the exercise of the rights or free-

<sup>159</sup> Andreh Hovsepian and Joseph Hovsepian, *A Cry from Iran* (2007), DVD.

<sup>160</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Reza (Davoud) Nejatsabet, April 5, 2011.

<sup>161</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No.16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Iran in 1975, art. 9.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*



doms guaranteed” under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the ICCPR, including freedom of religion, thought, and expression, and peaceful assembly and association; and (3) “When the total or partial non-observance of the international norms relating to the right to a fair trial, spelled out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the relevant international instruments accepted by the States concerned, is of such gravity as to give the deprivation of liberty an arbitrary character.”<sup>163</sup>

Therefore in the context of Iran, the government cannot arrest or detain individuals for their religious beliefs and activity, and no one can be held for prolonged periods without charges, formal indictment and trial. Sentencing after trial must be based on fair proceedings, which include the right of the accused to a lawyer.<sup>164</sup>

Reza Nejetsabet, accompanied here by his family, is a Christian electrician who was given a one-year suspended prison sentence on charges of “propaganda against the regime” for distributing Christian literature.



Photo by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran

<sup>163</sup> Working Group on Arbitrary Detention “Individual Complaints, Urgent Appeals, Deliberations,” <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Detention/Pages/Complaints.aspx> (accessed July 26, 2012).

<sup>164</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No.16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Iran in 1975; UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 13, Equality Before the Courts and the Right to a Fair and Public Hearing by an Independent Court Established by Law, para. 11.

## Arbitrary Arrest and Detention in Iran

Authorities in Iran have used arrests, detentions, and criminal prosecutions to target Protestants for activities that constitute standard religious practices within a religious community.

Of the 31 Christians the Campaign interviewed, 15 were arrested and detained by authorities. Of these Christians, authorities detained 11 of them for prolonged periods. Christians who spoke to the Campaign reported being detained from a few hours to a year and a half, 8 of which were detained over a month. Authorities formally charged 11 of them with crimes, leading to prosecution in 9 cases.

### Arrests

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, over 300 Christians have been arbitrarily arrested and detained throughout the country since June 2010, and at least 41 individuals were detained for periods ranging from one month to over a year, sometimes without official charges.<sup>165</sup> Mansour Borji of the Christian rights group Article 18 explained to the Campaign that the publicly available figures on Christian arrests and detentions are significantly lower than actual numbers, as many arrestees fear negative government reactions if they come forward. “The number of arrests fluctuates,” Borji said. “What we see in the media is, for instance, ‘20 or 30 arrested,’ but I know for a fact that is not true. The number is way beyond that. These people are so frightened when they are arrested, and they are threatened not to release this information. They ask us not to go public and we honor that request.”<sup>166</sup>

Most publically reported arrests have been attributed to the Ministry of Intelligence. However, starting in May of 2012, the Campaign began receiving reports from multiple sources of involvement of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) in arrests and other efforts to restrict Christian activities.<sup>167</sup>

Most Christians interviewed by the Campaign were arrested either when they reported for a summons at the local intelligence office or at their homes. In cases of home arrests, authorities conducted extensive searches of the arrestee’s residence focusing on collecting items related to Christianity. Kambiz K., a Christian convert from Karaj, described to the Campaign the raid on his home by Intelligence agents:

Between seven and eight in the morning, three undercover men from Intelligence, who to the best of my knowledge were unarmed, raided my home. . . . I asked them, “Why are you here?” He showed me the warrant—with the judge’s signature—that said they were allowed to enter my home. He told me, “We have this warrant to enter your home and take anything that is related to Christianity.” And as they confiscated all of my crosses, pictures, books, and CDs, throwing everything into a crate, I was right there standing over them. I told them, jokingly, “You forgot one cross.” Mr. Mousavi [an Intelligence officer] asked, “Where is it?” I answered, “In my heart,” and he replied, “I’ll rip your heart out,

<sup>165</sup> “UN experts on Iran and freedom of religion concerned over situation of religious minorities in the country,” UNHCR news release, September 20, 2012, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=12551&LangID=E>.

<sup>166</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji, Article 18, May 31, 2012.

<sup>167</sup> See International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Protestant Church Shutdown Sparks Fears of Coming Closure Spree,” June 8, 2012, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2012/06/protestant-church/> (accessed July 4, 2012). Note: Several sources that closely monitor the human rights of Iranian Christians have reported to the Campaign that the IRGC has been involved in church closures and arrests. They believe that this indicates an intensification of the government’s efforts to restrict Christian activity in Iran.

right out of your chest!”<sup>168</sup>

Kambiz K.’s testimony describes a pattern similar to the experiences of other Christians interviewed by the Campaign. Numerous Christians relayed that when security forces, typically intelligence agents, came to arrest them in their homes, the agents started by searching for and confiscating materials directly related to Christianity, such as bibles, Christian literature, crosses, images of Jesus Christ, church documents, and CDs and DVDs about Christianity. Authorities often conduct group raids, arresting several people from the same house church simultaneously, each at their family homes.

Ibrahim S. from Tehran converted when he was 22 years old. He told the Campaign that authorities raided his father’s home and arrested him the day after Christmas, December 26, 2010. During the arrest, authorities allegedly tried to coerce him to return to Islam and provide information about other church members.<sup>169</sup> He said he later learned that approximately 60 other members of his house church had also been arrested that day.<sup>170</sup> Ibrahim explained:

Four or five people came to our house at five in the morning with a search warrant, with only my name on it—I was at my father’s house. They said they were from the Ministry of Intelligence and I had to go [with them to] answer some questions. They went in, searched the entire house and took my CDs, laptop, books, everything.

Then they put me in a car and videotaped the entire event. They asked me, “Do you know why we arrested you?” I said no. Then they asked the same question again—with the video camera on my face—and I said no. He asked a third time and said “If you don’t answer [correctly] I will beat you until your nose bleeds.” So I said, “I think it’s because I’m Christian.” They took me along and said, “If you confess and give us your friends’ names and return to Islam we will return you back home. If not, then we’ll go some place unpleasant.” I did not cooperate with them and they took me to Evin prison where I stayed for over three months.<sup>171</sup>

In the first few months of 2012, authorities reportedly conducted several mass arrests of Christian members of house churches and recognized churches accused of proselytizing in cities across Iran including Ahvaz, Shiraz, Tehran, Esfahan, and Kermanshah.<sup>172</sup>

On February 22, 2012, for example, authorities arrested at least 10 members of St. Paul’s Anglican Church in Esfahan, including the pastor, according to Iranian Christian news agencies.<sup>173</sup> St. Paul’s is an officially recognized church that conducts services in Persian. Despite presiding over a government-recognized church, the pastor of St. Paul’s, Hekmat Salimi, was allegedly charged

<sup>168</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Kambiz K., April 4, 2011.

<sup>169</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Ibrahim S., January 4, 2012.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> “Escalating Crackdown on Iranian Christians,” *Mohabat News*, March 8, 2012, [http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4142:escalating-crack-down-on-iranian-christians-interview&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279](http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4142:escalating-crack-down-on-iranian-christians-interview&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279) (accessed July 26, 2012).

<sup>173</sup> “Home of a Christian Pastor in Esfahan was Raided by Security Authorities,” *Mohabat News*, February 23, 2012, [http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4054:home-of-a-christian-pastor-in-esfahan-was-raided-by-security-authorities&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279](http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4054:home-of-a-christian-pastor-in-esfahan-was-raided-by-security-authorities&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279) (accessed July 26, 2012); “Temporary Freedom for Pastor Hekmat Salimi and other Christians in Esfahan & Details of New Charges Against the Detained Christians,” *Farsi Christian News Network (FCNN)*, May 3, 2012, [http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2854:temporary-freedom-for-pastor-hekmat-salimi-and-other-christians-in-esfahan-a-details-of-new-charges-against-the-detained-christians&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593](http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2854:temporary-freedom-for-pastor-hekmat-salimi-and-other-christians-in-esfahan-a-details-of-new-charges-against-the-detained-christians&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593) (accessed July 26, 2012).

with crimes including Christian evangelization, unlawful publication of the Bible, and performing baptisms.<sup>174</sup>

Other St. Paul's members, some of whom were reportedly converts, were accused of a range of crimes, including propaganda against the regime, spreading Christianity, organizing house churches, distributing bibles, participating in Christian conferences, and being in contact with Baha'is and with Reza Safa, a diaspora-based televangelist.<sup>175</sup> Amongst the arrested St. Paul members was 78-year-old Giti Hakimpour, who was born into a Jewish-background family that had converted to Christianity.<sup>176</sup> Authorities reportedly released her after three days. Authorities released the other detainees after over two months in late April and early May, issuing bails of between 300,000,000 and 500,000,000 rials (approximately US\$24,500 to US\$40,800).<sup>177</sup>

Mansour Borji told the Campaign that most Christians arrested by authorities are eventually released, often with heavy bails. He stressed, however, that in many cases the investigations are never closed, nor are charges, if there are any, dismissed. This allows the government to restrict the person's religious practice through the threat of future prosecution or arrest. Borji explained:

Usually they are released but not cleared. So there is this threat of being re-summoned hovering over their head. They are basically made ineffective and are unable to continue their work because there is always this threat that new charges could be raised, they could be arrested or the bail could be taken.

You'll rarely find someone completely acquitted, rarely. The majority of them, if released on bail, have to sign a commitment that they will not partake in any Christian activities, which includes attending house churches or evangelizing or anything like that. Basically, [they are told], "If you have any faith in Christianity, keep it to yourself and don't mention it to anyone, don't go to church," which is contrary to the Christian faith.<sup>178</sup>

Borji's observations correspond to statements made by several Christians the Campaign interviewed, who reported they were released, often on bail, with looming charges or open files. Bails reported to the Campaign range from US\$2,000 to US\$200,000. The interviewees said that in order to cover bail amounts, they were often forced to post home deeds as collateral.

## Detentions

Christians interviewed by the Campaign described their detentions as ranging from a few hours to a year and a half; most were pre-trial detentions. Other detainees were held throughout the judicial processes and appeals. All the Christians interviewed for this report who had received prison sentences fled the

<sup>174</sup> "Temporary Freedom for Pastor Hekmat Salimi," *FCNN*.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> "78 Years Old Christian Lady Arrested in Esfahan by Security Authorities," *Mohabat News*, February 24, 2012, [http://mohabat-news.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4064%3A78-years-old-christian-lady-arrested-in-esfahan-by-security-authorities&catid=36%3AIranian-christians&Itemid=279](http://mohabat-news.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4064%3A78-years-old-christian-lady-arrested-in-esfahan-by-security-authorities&catid=36%3AIranian-christians&Itemid=279) (accessed July 26, 2012).

<sup>177</sup> "Temporary Freedom for Pastor Hekmat Salimi," *FCNN*; "Iranian Rials (IRR) to US Dollars (USD) Exchange Rate for April 30, 2012," *Exchange-Rates*, <http://www.exchange-rates.org/Rate/IRR/USD/4-30-2012> (accessed August 6, 2012).

<sup>178</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji, Article 18, May 31, 2012.

country before being forced to serve, although all of these individuals had already served some weeks to months in jail pre-sentencing. The Campaign also documented cases of Christian detentions lasting over three years.

In many cases, authorities held Christian detainees for the apparent purpose of conducting interrogations to coerce statements from them. Interrogators often used repeated interrogation, threats of criminal prosecution, threats of ill treatment, and promises of release to extort information about the detainee's church activities and members.

Suzan L., a convert who hosted a house church in Shiraz, told the Campaign about the interrogation period of her brief detention:

They placed me in the corner of a room, [facing the wall], with a table, and they said I can't look behind me or pay attention to anything. They would write their questions, I would [write my] answer. Questions like: "What church are you a member of? How many members are there? What are their names?" I only gave them my son, daughter, and [pastor's] names. They told me they wanted 80 to 90 names. He said, "Do you think we don't know?" I said, "It's because you know that I don't want to tell you." Their last question was, "Do you confess that you're an apostate?" I wrote "Absolutely not," along with a half-page theological argument as to why and they ripped up all the papers. They cursed at me, saying I was very disrespectful, and threatened to keep me in jail.<sup>179</sup>

Nearly all Christians interviewed for this report told the Campaign that they were open about their personal religious and church activities, not seeing their behavior as criminal. Nonetheless, authorities often used admission to basic Christian practices, especially those related to organizing house churches and proselytizing, as evidence of criminal activity.

Many Christians told the Campaign that they refused to provide interrogators with information about other church members. This often resulted in interrogators intensifying their questioning and threatening the detainee with criminal prosecution, the arrest of family members, prolonged detainment, or execution for apostasy.

Authorities also use the detention and the interrogation period to pressure individuals to sign written commitments to cease all Christian and church activities. Ibrahim S. reported that authorities detained him for just under four months.<sup>180</sup> Upon his release, interrogators pressured him to sign a written commitment not to establish a house church.

The officer told me, "If you establish a house church we will detain you here." Then they wanted to get my word that I won't establish a house church, but I refused to sign. They told me if I don't sign I'm going to stay here [in Evin prison], but I still didn't sign. They continued to threaten me and said they had to keep me there.

Then after a couple of hours they gave me a document which had the logo of the Ministry of Intelligence stamped on the paper. Again it said I cannot proselytize, I cannot establish

<sup>179</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Suzan L., April 5, 2011.

<sup>180</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Ibrahim S., January 4, 2012.

a house church, and I can only attend the [officially licensed] Central Assembly of God church. And this time they really pressured me to sign, so I did; I gave them my word. After that, they let me go.<sup>181</sup>

Authorities also detained Christians for prolonged periods ahead of trials or in accordance with court verdicts for charges stemming from their church activities. For example, in 2009, Behrouz Khanjani, a pastor from Shiraz, reportedly spent two periods totaling over 11 months in jail ahead of his trial.<sup>182</sup> A judge originally released Khanjani on bail after two months of interrogation and detention but, according to Khanjani's brother, re-detained him after he appealed to Parliament to legally grant Persian-speaking Christians the rights afforded to other Christians under the Iranian constitution.<sup>183</sup> The Revolutionary Court in Shiraz sentenced Khanjani to one year in prison for "propaganda against the regime."<sup>184</sup> Since his 11 months were counted as time served, he had to serve one month after sentencing.<sup>185</sup> Another pastor, Behnam Irani, from Khanjani's Pentecostal Church of Iran, is currently serving five years in prison for separate convictions in February 2008 and May 2011 for acting against national security.<sup>186</sup>

In another case, Noorollah Qabitzade, a convert from Dezful arrested in January 2011, was reportedly held by authorities in prison in Ahvaz, where he was put in solitary confinement and pressured to recant his conversion.<sup>187</sup> According to *Mohabat News*, he received a judicial hearing in September 2011 during which the judge allegedly asked him to recant his conversion and threatened Qabitzade with possible execution.<sup>188</sup> Authorities reportedly released Qabitzade on July 16, 2012, after nearly nineteen months of detention.<sup>189</sup>

In some cases, detainees experienced extended detentions without any charges, formal indictment, trial, or judicial sentencing. Authorities held 33-year-old Christian leader Farshid Fathi from Tehran for approximately 12 months without formal indictment.<sup>190</sup> Security forces originally arrested Fathi on December 26, 2010 as part of a Christmas crackdown on Christians. Christian news agencies claim that approximately 60 Christians were arrested during this action.<sup>191</sup> Most of the arrestees were released shortly

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Firouz Sadegh-Khanjani, January 4 and February 16, 2012.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "Days Before Release, Christian Pastor's Prison Sentence Extended," October 20, 2011, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/10/behnam-irani/> (accessed July 26, 2012).

<sup>187</sup> "The Minister of a House Church Still Being Held in the Prison of Ahvaz," *Mohabat News*, November 3, 2011, [http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3245:the-minister-of-a-house-church-still-being-held-in-the-prison-of-ahvaz&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279](http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3245:the-minister-of-a-house-church-still-being-held-in-the-prison-of-ahvaz&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279) (accessed July 26, 2012).

<sup>188</sup> "Christian House Church Leader Released After 560 Days in Prison," *Mohabat News*, July 18, 2012, [www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4992:christian-house-church-leader-released-after-560-days-in-prison&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279](http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4992:christian-house-church-leader-released-after-560-days-in-prison&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279) (accessed August 3, 2012).

<sup>189</sup> "Freedom for the Two Christian Converts After Long Period of Detention Without Charge," *FCNN*, July 21, 2012, [http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2930:freedom-for-the-two-christian-converts-after-long-period-of-detention-without-charge&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593](http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2930:freedom-for-the-two-christian-converts-after-long-period-of-detention-without-charge&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593) (accessed August 6, 2012); "The Minister of a House Church Still Being Held in the Prison of Ahvaz," *Mohabat News*, November 3, 2011, [http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3245:the-minister-of-a-house-church-still-being-held-in-the-prison-of-ahvaz&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279](http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3245:the-minister-of-a-house-church-still-being-held-in-the-prison-of-ahvaz&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279) (accessed July 26, 2012); "Christian House Church Leader Released After 560 Days in Prison," *Mohabat News*, July 18, 2012, [www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4992:christian-house-church-leader-released-after-560-days-in-prison&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279](http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4992:christian-house-church-leader-released-after-560-days-in-prison&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279) (accessed August 3, 2012).

<sup>190</sup> "The Ambiguous Status and Detention of a Christian Prisoner; Farshid Fathi," *Mohabat News*, June 30, 2011, [http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2255:the-ambiguous-status-and-detention-of-a-christian-prisonerfarshid-fathi&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279](http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2255:the-ambiguous-status-and-detention-of-a-christian-prisonerfarshid-fathi&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279) (July 26, 2012); International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with close family friend of Farshid Fathi, April 24, 2012.

<sup>191</sup> "Farshid Fathi, a Christian Prisoner Received a Six Year Prison Term," *Mohabat News*, April 22, 2012, [http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4410:farshid-fathi-a-christian-prisoner-received-a-six-year-prison-term&catid=36:iranian-chris-](http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4410:farshid-fathi-a-christian-prisoner-received-a-six-year-prison-term&catid=36:iranian-chris-)

thereafter; as of this writing Fathi remains the only person of this group still detained.<sup>192</sup>



Photo from the public domain  
Noorollah Qabitzade, a convert from Dezful, was reportedly put in solitary confinement and pressured to recant his conversion.

In January of 2012 authorities reportedly took Fathi to court to be indicted, holding the trial the same month.<sup>193</sup> “This was the first time that they formally told him his charges,” said Fathi’s close family friend.<sup>194</sup> “This is the first time it was coming from a judicial official. In the past he was told of the charges against him by interrogators.”<sup>195</sup> The family friend told the Campaign that authorities beat Fathi and kept him in solitary confinement for the vast majority of his detention.

The court handed down Fathi’s sentence in April 2012.<sup>196</sup> Judge Abdolghasem Salavati, known as the “Judge of Death” for doling out lengthy prison terms and executions to dozens of political prisoners, sentenced Fathi to six years on charges of “acting against national security,” “contact with enemy foreign countries,” and “religious propaganda.”<sup>197</sup> Fathi’s family friend said that the basis for Fathi’s alleged “crimes” was his work as a house church leader, distributing bibles, organizing proselytizing projects, and arranging for church

members to attend Christian seminars abroad.<sup>198</sup> The Appeals Court has confirmed Fathi’s six-year prison sentence.<sup>199</sup>

## Torture and Ill Treatment in International and Iranian Law

Article 7 of the ICCPR states: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”<sup>200</sup> The Human Right Committee notes in its General Comment 20 that Article 7 covers “acts that cause mental suffering to the victim.” Furthermore, the Committee makes clear that “prolonged solitary confinement of the detained or imprisoned person may amount to acts prohibited by Article 7.”<sup>201</sup>

Article 38 of the Iranian constitution also prohibits torture and ill treatment, declaring, “All forms of torture for the purpose of extracting confession or acquiring information are forbidden. Compulsion of individuals to testify, confess, or take an oath is not permissible; and any testimony, confession, or oath

tians&Itemid=279 (accessed July 26, 2012).

<sup>192</sup> “Details Of The Arrest And Summons Of More Than 60 Christian Citizens During Christmas” (“Jozeyat Bazdasht v Ehzar Bish az 60 Tan Az Shahrivandan Masihi Dar Christmas”), *Mohabat News*, January 4, 2011, [http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=747:iranian-christian&catid=52:iranianchristian&Itemid=282](http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=747:iranian-christian&catid=52:iranianchristian&Itemid=282) (accessed July 26, 2012).

<sup>193</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Protestant Pastor Sentenced to Six Years,” May 2, 2012, [www.iranhumanrights.org/2012/05/fathi-sentence/](http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2012/05/fathi-sentence/) (accessed July 26, 2012).

<sup>194</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with close family friend of Farshid Fathi, April 24, 2012.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Protestant Pastor Sentenced to Six Years.”

<sup>197</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with close family friend of Farshid Fathi, April 24, 2012; “Farshid Fathi, a Christian Prisoner Received a Six Year Prison Term,” *Mohabat News*, April 22, 2012, [http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4410:farshid-fathi-a-christian-prisoner-received-a-six-year-prison-term&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279](http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4410:farshid-fathi-a-christian-prisoner-received-a-six-year-prison-term&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279) (accessed July 26, 2012).

<sup>198</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with close family friend of Farshid Fathi, April 24, 2012.

<sup>199</sup> “Islamic Appeal Court upholds the six years prison term For detained Christian Mr. Farshid Fathi,” August 3, 2012, [http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2943:islamic-appeal-court-upholds-the-six-years-prison-term-for-detained-christian-mr-farshid-fathi](http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2943:islamic-appeal-court-upholds-the-six-years-prison-term-for-detained-christian-mr-farshid-fathi) (accessed November 12, 2012).

<sup>200</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No.16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Iran in 1975, art. 7.

<sup>201</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 20, Replaces General Comment 7 Concerning Prohibition of Torture and Cruel Treatment or Punishment, para. 6.

obtained under duress is devoid of value and credence. Violation of this article is liable to punishment in accordance with the law.”<sup>202</sup>

## Torture and Ill Treatment of Detainees

Of the 31 Christians interviewed by the Campaign, nine reported they had experienced some form of cruel, degrading, or inhumane treatment. The most common form of ill treatment was death threats by authorities asserting that converts were apostates and subject to execution. Such threats to life, alongside threats of prolonged imprisonment and threats that authorities would arrest the detainee’s family members, appear to be commonplace. Six Christians also reported being held in solitary confinement for extended periods of time, coupled with minimal contact with family, repeated interrogations, blindfolding and poor prison conditions.

Christian-born Ali Golchin from the city of Varamin spent 87 days in solitary confinement in Evin Prison.<sup>203</sup> He detailed the hardships he faced to the Campaign:

The worst type of detention and torture for a person is to place them in solitary confinement. Why? Because the solitary confinement cell is a place where someone experiences extreme [psychological] pressures. It is a place that’s 1.5 meters by 2.5 meters with one metal door that only opens for breakfast, lunch, or dinner, or when they want something from you or to take you to interrogation.

You are alone the whole time. And when you are interrogated you hear the worst things that you’ve heard your whole life from the interrogator.

They threaten you with so many things. One day they say, “You’re going to be executed.” One day they say: “You are going to jail for five years.” One day they say “You’re going to jail for 50 years.” One day they say, “We have your father, we’ve arrested your family.” They put pressure on you from every angle and you have no telephone contact with anyone outside the prison, except when the interrogator allows you in their presence with your eyes blindfolded to call your family only to say, “I am fine, I have no problems, everything is good here.” You just have to tell them nothing is going on.

The interrogations are long, with repetitive questions, and emotional pressure. They put a piece of paper in front of you and say, “Write this, confess to this act, work with us.”

You get sick from the food, the polluted air, the dirty bathrooms. Not a place to keep a human being, even if you are a suspect or convict. This is the worst place to live, they give you one blanket and one mat under you on a cold hard floor. In the winter it’s so cold and in the summer it is so hot. I myself to escape the heat at night, would soak my clothing and put them on.<sup>204</sup>

The Campaign’s interviews uncovered three first-hand accounts of physical abuse in the forms of beating,

<sup>202</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979, art. 38.

<sup>203</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Ali Golchin, June 1, 2012.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.



slapping, and kicking. One Christian reported receiving two floggings of over 20 lashes each.<sup>205</sup> Daniel Shahri, a then-19-year-old Christian-born Baptist from Esfahan, told the Campaign his interrogators beat him after he refused to answer some of their questions.

They asked me about another church member and I wrote, “Ask me anything you want about myself; I won’t talk about others.” The interrogator read this and said “Do you know where you are?” I said “Yes, in Dastjerd prison.”

He then threatened me, “I’ll show you where you are.” He left and came back with another officer. The [new officer] said, “Daniel, I heard you won’t cooperate.” I said, “I wouldn’t talk to them about others.” And they started beating me: they would slap me, swear, and circle around me. They slapped me maybe 10 times. One guy punched me in the face and kicked me in my leg. I had a chin beard at the time, they pulled the beard, pulled my hair. They didn’t ask me any more questions, and I said, “As long as you hit me, I won’t say anything.” I didn’t have any permanent injuries.

They then took me out into an open-air area; I still had a blindfold on and thought it was a balcony. I later learned it was the prison courtyard. One of them hit his baton against the wall in a threatening manner and said, “If you want to be a hero, don’t think we’ll let you become a hero. We’ll keep you here till you talk.”<sup>206</sup>



Photo from Campaign archives

Christian-born Ali Golchin spent 87 days in solitary confinement in Evin Prison.

Shahri was detained for two weeks before authorities released him to the care of his parents’ pastor.<sup>207</sup>

Twenty-three-year-old Alireza Najafzadeh from Shahryar, a town outside Karaj, told *Mohabat News* that he was arrested on September 26, 2010 and severely physically and psychologically tortured for three days during interrogations in Evin prison.<sup>208</sup> Interrogators asked him about his house church and his affiliation with foreign Christian networks and organizations. Najafzadeh described his experience:

Every time my answers would not satisfy them, [my interrogators] would once again hang me from a hook and would start beating me harder than before with things like a cable cord or a water hose—so much that I would pass out. They would then pour water on me and as soon as I would come back to consciousness, they would resume their tortures. Every time they would torture me, the intensity of their violence would increase to a point that I would completely pass out.<sup>209</sup>

Authorities reportedly released Najafzadeh on bail under the condition that he would not seek medi-

<sup>205</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Sina P., April 5, 2011.

<sup>206</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Daniel Shahri, October 31, 2011.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> “The Beating and Torture of a New Christian at the Shahryar Detention Center,” *Mohabat News*, December 27, 2010, [http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=661:the-beating-and-torture-of-a-new-christian-at-the-shahryar-detention-center&catid=36:iranian-christians](http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=661:the-beating-and-torture-of-a-new-christian-at-the-shahryar-detention-center&catid=36:iranian-christians) (accessed July 26, 2012).

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

cal treatment or tell anyone about his injuries.<sup>210</sup> “They told me that if I talk about my interrogation or torture with anyone or continue my Christian activities, I would face severe consequences, such as being killed intentionally by a car in a way that would look like an accident or my family would find my dead body in a farm field outside of town with no reasonable explanation as to the cause of death,” he added.<sup>211</sup>

Other recent allegations of physical torture include those by Abbas Sarjaloo, a convert with family in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard who was allegedly arrested on April 1, 2011 and released two days later after authorities beat him and burnt him with a cigarette.<sup>212</sup> Amnesty International and Article 18 also reported separate allegations of authorities severely physical abusing and beating house church members Mohsen Namvar and Shahin Zanboori in 2008.<sup>213</sup>

## Prosecution of Protestants

When the authorities charge Christians with religious crimes, it is usually for apostasy or blasphemy (also know as “insulting Islamic sanctities” or “insulting Islam”). In some cases blasphemy (as well as national security crimes) appears to be used by prosecutors and judges as substitution for an apostasy charge—because the judicial authorities appear to be avoiding the potential international criticism of an apostasy charge.<sup>214</sup>

However, given the Iranian government’s view that Christian converts are, primarily, a political threat, Protestants are far more commonly charged with political crimes such as “propaganda against the regime,” “acting against national security,” and “contact with a foreign enemy.” As such they are prosecuted in Revolutionary Courts. The Campaign found that the evidentiary bases for these charges and prosecutions were routinely basic Christian activities, such as evangelizing, hosting church services or bible studies, attending Christian conferences, or distributing bibles.

For example, Branch 9 of the Revolutionary Court in Gilan sentenced 39-year-old electrician Reza (Davoud) Nejetsabet to a one-year suspended prison sentence for the crime of “propaganda against the regime.”<sup>215</sup> In its verdict the court noted:

The defendant conducted his illegal and anti-religious activities, starting in 2006, by hold-



Photo from Campaign archives

Daniel Shahri, a Christian-born Baptist from Esfahan, was beaten by interrogators at age 19 when he refused to answer questions about fellow church-members.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Article 18, “Religious Freedom – Christianity,” February 2012, unpublished document on file with International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

<sup>213</sup> Article 18, “Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran,” September 4, 2001, unpublished document on file with International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran; Amnesty International, Fear of torture and ill-treatment/ Possible prisoners of conscience, May 30, 2008, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE13/079/2008/en/3beac199-3876-11dd-a7d1-851179bc648e/mde130792008eng.html> (accessed July 4, 2012).

<sup>214</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with anonymous lawyer, October 1, 2011.

<sup>215</sup> See Judgment in the Case of Reza Nejetsabet, 1<sup>st</sup> Circuit Islamic Revolutionary Court of Rasht, Case No. 8809981315101536, July 13, 2010, on file with International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

ing family gatherings to attract Shi'a youth. [He] distributed items against Islamic culture. He held meetings under the guise of prayer and dinner, but by talking face-to-face [with attendees] he aimed to penetrate the beliefs and thoughts of Muslim youth. The most significant aspect of the defendant's propaganda against the regime, which he is guilty of, was weakening of Islamic beliefs.<sup>216</sup>

The director of the Iranian Christian news agency FCNN, Shahab Ebrahimi, discussed the Iranian government's increasing use of political charges against Christians with the Campaign:

It is hard for the government of the Islamic Republic to [publicly] oppose a spiritual movement, but it is easy for the Islamic Republic to [publicly] oppose a political movement.

We Iranian Christians have never seen ourselves as a political opposition, but the government wants to characterize us as political because they want to tie us to groups outside the country and paint us as supporters of foreigners. They use this tactic to repress us.

What is actually said at house churches that the government is so against? Nothing political is said in house churches.

Iranian Christians don't say anything that the government can really object to, except that in their services they talk about God and worship God. But if you imprison or kill someone because they talked about God, it's fundamentally hypocritical [for a religious government]. So they need to say we are political and support foreigners and turn this into a political issue.

Before this was a public issue in Iran, if they arrested a Muslim that had become a Christian, they would normally arrest them for the crime of apostasy. For example, Pastor Hossein Soodmand and Pastor Mehdi Dibaj . . . were both taken to prison and court for the crime of apostasy under Sharia law. But when this became a public issue, they realized if they arrested hundreds of people for the crime of apostasy, that would cause a stir domestically and internationally. So now they arrest and charge [Christians] with "acting against national security" and "contact with anti-regime groups." But during the actual interrogations, the interrogators mostly focus on the issue of apostasy and leaving Islam.<sup>217</sup>

House church members associated with church organizations based abroad have come under particular attack, since Iranian authorities interpret such associations as a national security crime. A close family friend of Farshid Fathi, who was convicted of "being in contact with a foreign enemy," told the Campaign that authorities were particularly sensitive about Fathi's contact with the UK-based Elam Ministries, which provide training and literature for congregations in Iran.<sup>218</sup>

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> "Iranian Christian Journalist Discusses Government Campaign to Target Protestants," *FCNN*, January 15, 2012, [http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2747:iranian-christian-journalist-discusses-government-campaign-to-target-protestants&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593](http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2747:iranian-christian-journalist-discusses-government-campaign-to-target-protestants&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593) (accessed July 27, 2012).

<sup>218</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with close family friend of Farshid Fathi, April 24, 2012; See Elam Ministries website, <http://www.elam.com/articles/About-Elam/> (accessed August 6, 2012).

## Due Process and Access to a Lawyer

Several Christians told the Campaign that they did not have fair trials; either they did not have access to a lawyer or, if they did, he or she was not able to prepare a full defense in court. Reza (Davoud) Nejatsabet told the Campaign:

I didn't have a lawyer. I couldn't afford one and the court didn't appoint one for me. In court they didn't give me an opportunity to defend myself. They just interrogated me, in both my hearings. "Why did you convert? When did you convert? How old were you when you converted?"

The judge just relayed his own opinion of Islam. "Why did you put Islam aside? Islam is good. You're on the wrong path." There was no opportunity to say why I became a Christian and challenge why they were targeting me. I was interrogated and then they sentenced me. I couldn't defend myself at all.<sup>219</sup>

Farshid Fathi's close family friend told the Campaign that, while Fathi did have a lawyer, the lawyer was denied full access to his client's case:

Shortly after his arrest, Fathi's family retained a lawyer for him, but when his lawyer reported to the court they wouldn't even give the lawyer the case file or tell him the file's content or charges. But when they . . . wanted to hold a trial for him they told his family, "If you want, now you can get a lawyer."

So, he had a lawyer but the lawyer was more like an advisor, because when the lawyer went to court they wouldn't give him the file to study, to see what his indictment was, to see what court orders had been issued, to see what his charges were. Until right before the trial, the lawyer didn't have access to the file. Just before trial, a few days, they gave him the file, but not even the full file, for him to study it and try to defend [Fathi] in court.<sup>220</sup>

In nearly every case of detention and prosecution, Christian interviewees reported not having access to a lawyer during at least one of the steps leading up to their trial or their release on bail: arraignment, detention, or interrogation. Daniel Shahri told the Campaign:

I had no contact with my lawyer. The only way I knew I had a lawyer was that once [prison officials] brought me a piece of paper to sign, when I asked what it was they said this is so [my parents] could get me a lawyer. They even threatened my sister, when she was being interrogated, saying, "By what right did you go and get Daniel a lawyer?"<sup>221</sup>

Amin Pishkar, who was sentenced on September 8, 2010 to one year in prison for "propaganda against the regime through spreading Christianity," told the Campaign that he also was not allowed a lawyer dur-



Photo from the public domain

Pastor Farshid Fathi's lawyer was denied full access to his case files. Fathi was sentenced to six years in Evin Prison.

<sup>219</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Reza (Davoud) Nejatsabet, April 5, 2011.

<sup>220</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with close family friend of Farshid Fathi, April 24, 2012.

<sup>221</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Daniel Shahri, October 31, 2011.

ing the interrogation stage of his detention.<sup>222</sup> Iranian criminal procedural law does not allow a suspect access to a lawyer until after the end of the investigation, a rule that human rights organizations have noted violates due process under international law.<sup>223</sup> Pishkar told the Campaign:

Since I was arrested and detained under a temporary detention order, lawyers were not allowed to interfere. I was at the interrogation stage and so the interrogations had to be completed before any lawyer could get involved. So they took me straight to court to get permission to keep me for 15 days in solitary confinement so they could interrogate me to complete my record and then send me back to court.<sup>224</sup>

### International and Iranian Law on Freedom of Assembly and Association

Article 21 of the ICCPR, to which Iran is a party, mandates, “The right of peaceful assembly shall be recognized.”<sup>225</sup> Article 22 of the ICCPR safeguards free association, declaring, “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of association with others.”<sup>226</sup>

Iran’s constitution provides similar protections regarding association and assembly. Recognized religious minorities are granted freedom to form associations, such as churches, under Article 26 of the constitution:

The formation of parties, societies, political or professional associations, as well as religious societies, whether Islamic or pertaining to one of the recognized religious minorities, is permitted provided they do not violate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, the criteria of Islam, or the basis of the Islamic Republic. No one may be prevented from participating in the aforementioned groups, or be compelled to participate in them.<sup>227</sup>

Article 27 also protects free assembly, stating, “Public gatherings and marches may be freely held, provided arms are not carried and that they are not detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam.”<sup>228</sup>

In practice, the Iranian government has systematically breached its international and domestic obligations regarding freedom of association and assembly.

<sup>222</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Amin Pishkar, April 5, 2012.

<sup>223</sup> See Human Rights Watch, *Iran: You Can Detain Anyone for Anything: Iran’s Broadening Clampdown on Independent Activism*, January 2008, <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2008/01/06/you-can-detain-anyone-anything-0> (accessed September 4, 2012).

<sup>224</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Amin Pishkar.

<sup>225</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No.16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Iran in 1975, art. 21.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 22.

<sup>227</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979, art. 26.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 27.

## Restrictions on Assembly and Association in Iran

Through policies that range from restricting Protestants from establishing legally permitted churches to stopping them from gathering in informal churches groups, the Iranian government has severely undermined the ability of Christians to freely form and join congregations.

### *Limitations on Recognized Churches*

Despite their legal status, recognized churches are still subjected to government policies that violate the right to free association and assembly, especially those belonging to Protestant congregations.

Such policies generally do not take the form of written law or regulation.<sup>229</sup> Instead, they typically come from orders from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which traditionally oversees recognized religious organizations and churches.<sup>230</sup> According to Iranian Christian rights advocates, recognized churches are forced to report to the Ministry before admitting new members to their congregations.<sup>231</sup> They also require current members to carry membership cards and submit a photocopy to the authorities.<sup>232</sup> Worshipers are reportedly subject to random identity checks by authorities sometimes posted outside the congregation center.<sup>233</sup>

The Ministry has also tried to require recognized churches to hold services strictly on Sunday, which is a weekday (and workday) in Iran.<sup>234</sup>

This, along with the suspension of some Friday services (which fall on the Iranian weekend), has made it more difficult for people to attend services.<sup>235</sup> According to Christian media, on February 10, 2011, the Ministry of Intelligence ordered the Emmanuel Protestant Church and St. Peter's Evangelical Church to end their Friday services.<sup>236</sup> Similarly, the Assembly of God church in Tehran, which conducts services in Persian, was reportedly forced to end Friday church services on October 30, 2009, following threats by



Photo courtesy of Church of Iran

Amin Pishkar, sentenced to one year in prison for “propaganda against the regime through spreading Christianity,” was not allowed a lawyer during his interrogations.

<sup>229</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, October 11, 2011; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji, Article 18, May 31, 2012.

<sup>230</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji.

<sup>231</sup> Michael Nazir-Ali, “Christianity in Iran: A Brief Survey,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* vol. 9 (2009), p. 38; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji.

<sup>232</sup> U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Iran: Ethnic and Religious Minorities*, by Hussein D. Hassan, CRS Report RL34021 (Washington, DC: Office of Congressional Information and Publishing, November 25, 2008), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL34021.pdf>, (accessed July 24, 2012).

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>234</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Executive Director Shahab Ebrahimi, Farsi Christian News Network, December 7, 2011.

<sup>235</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Shahab Ebrahimi; See “Mandatory Closure of the Central Assemblies of God Church in Tehran,” *FCNN*, November 1, 2009, [http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=618:mandatory-closure-of-the-central-assemblies-of-god-church-in-tehran&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593](http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=618:mandatory-closure-of-the-central-assemblies-of-god-church-in-tehran&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593) (accessed August 3, 2012); “More Churches are Forced to Cease Persian Language Services in Tehran,” *FCNN*, March 12, 2012, [http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2802:more-churches-are-forced-to-cease-persian-language-services-in-tehran&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593](http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2802:more-churches-are-forced-to-cease-persian-language-services-in-tehran&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593) (accessed August 3, 2012).

<sup>236</sup> “Churches Forced to Stop Farsi Worship in Tehran, Iran,” *Compass Direct*, February 17, 2012, [http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/iran/article\\_1406358.html](http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/iran/article_1406358.html) (accessed July 4, 2012).

the Revolutionary Guard that, if it did not do so, the church would be “shut down forever.”<sup>237</sup>

Authorities have also allowed only a few recognized churches to conduct Persian-language religious services.<sup>238</sup> They have tried to require all Orthodox and Protestant churches run by Assyrians and Armenians to conduct services and religious gatherings in their ethnic languages.<sup>239</sup> By limiting the use of Persian, the country’s most widely spoken language, authorities reduce the ability of the majority of Iranians to partake in Christian services. According to Farsi Christian News Network (FCNN), in February 2009 officials reportedly prevented Father Victor, the priest of the Assyrian Church of Shahrara in the city of Tehran, from holding Persian-language church services.<sup>240</sup> A Revolutionary Court, FCNN reported, issued an order to close the church, to which Father Victor announced the church would need to revert to conducting purely Assyrian language services to remain open.<sup>241</sup> Father Victor’s church was one of the few Assyrian Protestant churches that had conducted Persian-language services.<sup>242</sup>

On some occasions the authorities have shut down recognized churches altogether. At the end of May 2012, officials from the Revolutionary Guard Intelligence Organization forced the Assembly of God church in the western Tehran neighborhood of Jannat Abad to close its doors and discontinue services, Alan H., a local source in Iran with close knowledge of the Iranian Protestant community, told the Campaign.<sup>243</sup> According to the Alan H., the authorities told the church leaders that they had to close the church, and that if they didn’t, the authorities would close the church and then they would not be able to keep the building afterwards to sell.<sup>244</sup> “Because if [the authorities] shut down the church themselves then the government will confiscate the building,” said Alan H.<sup>245</sup> The Jannat Abad church held its last services on May 28, 2012, after having operated in the same building for over 15 years; the church gained ownership of the building in 2007.<sup>246</sup>

Starting around May of 2012, Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Intelligence Organization reportedly began to take an increasingly large role in the oversight of Christian churches in Iran. “In the past month, all of a sudden the individual government agents responsible for contacting church leaders and giving them orders in Tehran changed,” Shahab Ebrahimi, director of the Farsi Christian News Network, told the Campaign.<sup>247</sup> “Prior to this, the people who did this work were experts in Iranian minority groups from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Intelligence. The new people who appear to [oversee churches] introduce themselves as agents of the Revolutionary Guard.”<sup>248</sup>

<sup>237</sup> “Shahrara Church is Ordered Closed by the Islamic Revolutionary Court,” *FCNN*, March 27, 2009, [http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=596:shahrara-church-is-ordered-closed-by-the-islamic-revolutionary-court-&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593](http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=596:shahrara-church-is-ordered-closed-by-the-islamic-revolutionary-court-&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593) (accessed July 27, 2012).

<sup>238</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Shahab Ebrahimi.

<sup>239</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Shahab Ebrahimi.

<sup>240</sup> “Farsi Speaking Christians Refused Entry to Church,” *FCNN*, February 10, 2009, [http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=587:farsi-speaking-christians-refused-entry-to-church-&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593](http://www.fcnn.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=587:farsi-speaking-christians-refused-entry-to-church-&catid=127:iranian-christian&Itemid=593) (July 27, 2012).

<sup>241</sup> “Shahrara Church is Ordered Closed,” *FCNN*.

<sup>242</sup> “Farsi Speaking Christians,” *FCNN*.

<sup>243</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Protestant Church Shutdown Sparks Fears of Coming Closure Spree,” June 8, 2012, <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2012/06/protestant-church/> (accessed July 4, 2012).

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

### *State Action Against House Churches*

Protestants have faced a particular catch 22: By law, all recognized minority religious organizations in Iran must be granted licenses from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in order to legally form and operate.<sup>249</sup> In practice this includes owning or renting a building space, holding services, and establishing church institutions such as religious schools.<sup>250</sup> However, Protestant converts are not granted licenses by the state; this forces them to continue to worship in the unrecognized house churches that leave them – and especially their congregation leaders – vulnerable to raids, arrests and imprisonment.

Firouz Khanjani told the Campaign about the efforts of his Pentecostal house church, whose members are mostly converts, to register for a license in order to become an officially recognized religious organization and establish a recognized church.

We had a house church because the government wouldn't give us a license to open an official location and operate. We tried to obtain one from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance but we were denied. We wrote them a number of letters arguing that according to the constitution it is our right to have some activity and to pick our own religion, but they never replied.<sup>251</sup>

Davoud Rostami, a 29-year-old convert from Karaj, told the Campaign that his house church congregation was forced to take extensive measures, such as limiting the number of congregants, to ensure their safety. He said:

We had to congregate in secret, in someone's home, and with the lights off. We locked all the doors and whispered our prayers so no one would hear us. We couldn't tell anyone that we were Christians and that we were congregating. We even turned our cell phones off and took out our SIM cards.

There were approximately 20 of us at these gatherings. Sometimes [it was] just our friends and other times someone came to provide a sermon. Our pastor organized the whole thing to make sure we didn't have more than 20 people.

[Also] rather than all 20 people entering our house we asked that they entered two by two or three by three, and we told everyone not to tell anyone . . . because it would be dangerous for all of us.<sup>252</sup>

Hamid Pishkar, who was an active member of the same Rasht house church as Khanjani, described to the

<sup>249</sup> The Law Regarding the Activities of Political and Professional Parties, Groups and Organizations, and Islamic Associations, or Recognized Religious Minorities, August 29, 1981, <http://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/legislation/political-parties-law/> (accessed August 1, 2012), arts. 4, 5 and 6; Note: Shi'a-Muslim organizations were also under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance and Culture until 2009 when supervision of these groups was transferred to the Islamic Development Organization, See Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Interior, "The Islamic Development Organization issues permits for Quranic centers, religious organizations, religious associations, religious delegations" (Sodour Mojavez Tasis Kanounhaye Qurani, Tashakolhaye Mazhabi, Anjomanhaye Islami, Heyathaye Mazhabi Tavasot Sazman Tablighat Islami"), November 14, 2010, <http://saman.moi.ir/Portal/Home/ShowPage.aspx?Object=News&CategoryID=e9ee1abe-5f77-4623-9c9f-432797f68f78&WebPartID=5a61d41b-5415-4f99-8cb1-532ebdc7f9c8&ID=f4bbd2d0-fc64-4a9d-842b-c90c5337c57c> (accessed August 6, 2012).

<sup>250</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Firouz Sadegh-Khanjani, January 4 and February 16, 2012; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Shahab Ebrahimi.

<sup>251</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Firouz Sadegh-Khanjani.

<sup>252</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Davoud Rostami, April 2, 2011.



Campaign what happened to him and his fellow churchgoers when they tried to hold religious gatherings in private homes.

Around the month of July 2010 authorities called the home of a [church member] whose home was used for gatherings that I ran and told him to cancel gatherings. They told him, “[Hamid] is using you. Why doesn’t he hold the gathering at his home?” They worked on him a bit.

Then they raided the very next gathering. There were 15 or 16 of us, men and women. There were three officials. One by one, they pulled members aside and got their biographical information. Then they handcuffed the homeowner and took him to the local intelligence office and held him for three or four days until he signed a guarantee saying he wouldn’t hold [Christian] gatherings in his home anymore. He was released the next day and our gathering then of course couldn’t be held there anymore.

So I moved the meeting to my home until we found a larger house so we could keep the gatherings going. The very first meeting we had at a larger house, the intelligence officers raided it. They seized our books, dispersed the congregants after they got all their biographies, and took me to the detention center and threw me in solitary confinement.

The next day they took me in front of a judge and charged me and then threw me back in solitary confinement. I was held in solitary confinement for about fifteen days and over those fifteen days I was interrogated just about every day.

All their pressures were aimed at making [me] give a written promise to stop holding [church] gatherings. Their main line was, “You have to have a permit [for these gatherings], we don’t care if you’re Christian or not. Even those who want to hold Quran readings in their homes need to get a permit.” But the reality they know is that there is no [government office] that would give a permit to a Christian group like ours for meetings. And in fact the head of our church’s governing council had been trying to get a permit for the preceding two or three years but his efforts went nowhere.

They said, “The government told us to shut down any group with no permit that still holds meetings.” I replied, “Are you just and is Islam just?” to which they said, “Yes.” I said, “OK, if you are just, then help me. I’m a Christian and I want to hold gatherings but [the government] won’t give me a permit. This is an injustice only you can resolve.” They replied, “Sir, we only execute the law and it is the nation’s laws that are flawed.”<sup>253</sup>

### *Restrictions on Partaking in Christian Events Abroad and Freedom of Movement*

Protestant Christians in Iran often travel abroad, usually to Turkey or Armenia, to partake in large Christian services and conferences. These events are typically organized by Persian-language churches and Christian institutions based outside of Iran. Often conferences are seminars that provide training to Iranian church leaders on theology and religious instruction. Other conferences take the form of large religious gatherings and are sometimes the locations of baptisms—a rite that some house churches

<sup>253</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Hamid Pishkar, April 5, 2012.

intentionally avoid performing in Iran either for theological or security reasons. In terms of scale and access to qualified instructors, these events would be difficult to organize in Iran.

Some Iranian Protestants reported to the Campaign that authorities stopped them from attending Christian conferences and services abroad. Others reported being threatened, arrested, or prosecuted, in part because they attended such events. One Christian told the Campaign that authorities placed his family member, a congregation leader, under a travel ban, preventing him from leaving the country for any purpose.<sup>254</sup>

Brothers Behnam T. and Behzad T., both Christian converts from the city of Kerman, told the Campaign that Ministry of Intelligence officials prevented them from leaving Iran to attend a training course in Turkey. Behnam T. said:

We wanted to attend a Christian leadership course in Turkey, so we signed up for it in Iran. It was a condensed class that lasted three months. There were seven of us from the church who were prepared to go. We got to the bus station, found our bus, but before the bus drove off a gentleman from [the Ministry of Intelligence] came up and called out each of our names and told us to get off the bus. He then confiscated our passports. The police officer [we asked for help] told us he couldn't do anything to help us since it was the Ministry of Intelligence that confiscated our passports.<sup>255</sup>

House church leader Farshid Fathi's six-year prison sentence was based on arrangements he had made for himself and other church members to participate in a conference outside Iran. Fathi's close family friend told the Campaign:

During the interrogations [his captors] had Farshid's laptop, which contained all sorts of church financial information. So, for example, money paid for [a church member] to go on a mission was seen as a crime . . . our travel abroad to conferences was seen as a crime, [all these things] were seen as evidence of [the so-called crimes] of "acting against national security" and "being in contact with enemy foreign countries."<sup>256</sup>

Authorities raided the home of Hamid Pishkar, a member of the Rasht Pentecostal house church, seized the congregants' books, and placed him in solitary confinement.



Photo courtesy of Church of Iran

## Monitoring and Harassment

Part and parcel of Iran's persecution of Protestants is a systematic practice of monitoring and harassment. While these government acts are not fully distinct from other rights violations, they represent the violations experienced by many Christians who might otherwise never face a jail cell or a courtroom.

Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and other government agencies, including the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, closely monitor the activities of recognized churches and house churches and their

<sup>254</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with an anonymous Christian, June 1, 2012.

<sup>255</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Behnam T., December 8, 2011.

<sup>256</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with close family friend of Farshid Fathi, April 24, 2012.

members.<sup>257</sup> Information gathered by the Ministry of Intelligence then becomes the basis for arrests and prosecutions, as well as for the closures of churches.

Government monitoring can take both open and covert forms. Open monitoring usually involves Ministry of Intelligence officials forcing church leaders from both recognized churches and house churches to provide information about services, education programs, and members, including names and biographical data. Eleven Christians, all from house churches, reported to the Campaign that they had been summoned, often through their church leaders, in a few cases through their employers, to either the Ministry of Intelligence, police, or Revolutionary Courts for questioning and then released thereafter. Some Christians reported being summoned tens of times.

Christians told the Campaign that during these summons their interrogators would often try to convince them to return to Islam. Interrogators would also often insult and threaten them, repeatedly emphasizing they should stop their participation in the house church.

Reza, a house church leader, told the Campaign:

My first interrogation was in 2002. They would summon me and ask biographical information, then summon me again and repeatedly ask, “How did you convert? Where have you been?”

They would summon us through brother Youcef [Nadarkhani, our pastor]. They would call him and say tell so-and-so to come and Youcef would call us and say get up and head to the Ministry of Intelligence. Sometimes they would call us directly. I always went to the Ministry of intelligence for interrogation but a few of the other members when to the police.

They would ask, “When did you convert? How did you convert? Who is your financial backer? Are you in contact with foreign churches? Who supports you? Where do you find your members? Who are the new members of your church? Tell us their names. What days are your services? Do men and women co-mingle? Do the women wear their headscarves? Are their husbands around?”

I’d guess I was interrogated about ten times in the last decade.<sup>258</sup>

Authorities also appear to monitor churches through covert means. Christians reported to the Campaign that Intelligence officers told them they were following them and monitoring the communications of church members.

Omid Z., a pastor from Tehran, told the Campaign: “My interrogator told me my every action was watched. They even knew what restaurant I ate at on a trip to Europe. He said ‘We are the Ministry of Intelligence, it is our job to know these things.’”<sup>259</sup> Several Christians told the Campaign that they believed

<sup>257</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari; Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia*, p. 178; Note: Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, “Responsibilities and Policies,” art. 19, <http://www.farhang.gov.ir/profileofministry-responsibilities-en.html> (August 6, 2012); International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Shahab Ebrahimi; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji.

<sup>258</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Reza (Davoud) Nejetsabet, April 5, 2011.

<sup>259</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Omid Z., June 21, 2012.

that authorities followed them or tapped their phones because Intelligence officials told them things about themselves that were otherwise private.

Other Christians reported that Intelligences officers tried to solicit or coerce them to act as informants on their own congregations. Arian Risbaf told the Campaign:

All at once they start listing all the other things they know about me like my close friendship with my late best friend Amir Javadifar [a student arrested while participating in a post-2009 election demonstration who died from abuse inflicted at Kahrizak Detention Center].<sup>260</sup> They showed me our pictures together, the poetry and narrations I wrote for him, the videos I made, and the radio interview I did about him. They also showed me the television show I worked on ten years ago for that same Christian television station. Every single thing they knew about my life all of sudden was all on the table and they said, “You did all of these things.” I replied, “Yes, I did.”

They said “Now we have two options: either you – with this current file we have – can go in front of the judge and spend a minimum of five to six years in prison along with a beating or you can do something to clean your record.” I asked, “What can I do?” He said, “I don’t know, can you think of anything?” I said, “I’m not sure; maybe I can turn some religious Islamic books into audio books.” He replied “No, no that’s not it.” I responded, “So you tell me.” He said, “You can be our informant for seven to ten months and provide us with intel on the Christian community and the famous people with whom you associate with, and after that your crimes can be cleared. Also, after the seven to ten months – if you would like – there is the possibility of transitioning this into a paid career.”

I just played along asking, “Well how much could I make?” He said, “From 3 million to 15 million rials [US\$250 to US\$1,250] depending on the type of intel you provide us.” I asked, “How would I give you the information I find?” He said, “That’s easy, we’ll give you an email address and you go create a new email address under a different name and once a week you send us your information.” I said, “Okay, I’ll do this for you,” and he responded, “That’s great, you picked the correct option and this way there won’t be any trouble for you.” When I left the building, within 20 days I sold everything and took care of unfinished business and fled the country illegally.<sup>261</sup>

## Free Expression under International and Iranian Law

Article 19 (2) of the ICCPR guarantees that:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.<sup>262</sup>

<sup>260</sup> See Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, *One Person’s Story: Mr. Amir Javadifar*, <http://www.iranrights.org/english/memorial-case-61251.php> (accessed July 27, 2012).

<sup>261</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Arian Risbaf, November 11, 2011.

<sup>262</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No.16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Iran in 1975, art. 19(2).

The Human Rights Committee which oversees implementation of the ICCPR notes that free expression includes the right to express “religious discourse.”<sup>263</sup> Individuals have the right to use “all forms of expression and the means of their dissemination,” including “spoken, written and sign language and such non-verbal expression as images and objects of art” as well as “books, newspapers, pamphlets . . . all forms of audio-visual as well as electronic and internet-based modes of expression.”<sup>264</sup> The Committee also makes clear that Article 19 requires a free and uncensored press and media.<sup>265</sup>

As part of free expression, Article 19 protects the right to “access to information,”<sup>266</sup> and as a corollary right, Article 18 of the ICCPR protects the right to “prepare and distribute religious texts or publications.”<sup>267</sup>

The Iranian constitution also includes a provision protecting expression. Article 24 states “Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public. The details of this exception will be specified by law.”<sup>268</sup>

In practice, the Iranian government systematically violates its Christians’ right to free expression.

## Attacks on Free Expression and Access to Information in Iran

In essence, Iranian authorities try to stop Christians from speaking about their religion to others and stop others from having access to information about Christian beliefs.

Toward this end, the government has blocked access to many of the Persian-language Christian websites in Iran,<sup>269</sup> and, according to Christian rights activists, has also on occasion jammed the four Persian-language Christian satellite stations, Mohabat TV, Sat-7 Pars, Kelisa TV, and Nejat TV, that broadcast into Iran.<sup>270</sup>

Voice actor Arian Risbaf told the Campaign that authorities forced him to stop working on projects for a Christian satellite station, as well as a Persian audio book on the Bible.<sup>271</sup> Initially, in 2008, authorities raided the studio where Risbaf worked.<sup>272</sup> The studio dubbed movies, television programs, and cartoons for a Christian satellite station based in the Netherlands. When the studio owner learned that Risbaf was himself Christian he assigned Risbaf most of the Christian related projects including a documentary film about the murder of Pastor Haik Hovsepian, entitled, *Cry from Iran*. After the raid, authorities twice summoned Risbaf to the Ministry of Intelligence that year, interrogated him, and made him sign a letter promising not to work on Christian related projects.<sup>273</sup> Risbaf explained:

<sup>263</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 34, Freedoms of Opinion and Expression (102<sup>nd</sup> session, 2011), para. 11.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 12.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 13.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 18.

<sup>267</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No.16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Iran in 1975, art. 18.

<sup>268</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979, art. 24.

<sup>269</sup> Elam Ministries, “Reaching Iran: Latest prayer news,” <http://www.elam.com/articles/Reaching-Iran--Latest-prayer-news/> (accessed July 4, 2012); International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Executive Director Shahab Ebrahimi, Farsi Christian News Network, December 7, 2011.

<sup>270</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji, Article 18, May 31, 2012.

<sup>271</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Arian Risbaf, November 11, 2011.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

The interrogator asked, “Who translated? Who were the voice actors at the studio? How is it that everyone there is Muslim and you’re the only Christian? Were you the supervisor?” And he asked 300 questions like these. I answered everything precisely because I was scared; this was my first time facing something like the Ministry of Intelligence.

Ten days [after my first trip to the station] they called me again and had me come in for some follow up questions and had me sign an affidavit swearing that I’ll never work for a Christian satellite television station again. And [they said] “If you sign this affidavit we’ll leave you alone.” So I signed the form and swore that I’d never work for a Christian television station. Up until last year I didn’t do any work related to [Christian] voice overs, translations or satellites.

[But] I asked them, “We’ve been working at this studio for five years and if we knew that this work was illegal we would have stopped, why did you come know?” They replied, “Because up until now the impact of your work has not been much but from two years ago until now the volume of your youth audience has increased and children from ages four to ten go to school saying ‘I want to be a Christian’ and we reply how do you know about Christianity? They answer ‘I watch movies from the Christian Farsi channel’ and from that we discovered that you are becoming dangerous and your work is deviating our youth.”<sup>274</sup>

Risbaf told the Campaign that after his three-year forced hiatus from Christian projects, in October 2011 he took on a commission to record an audio book of the Bible in Persian. When authorities learned of this project they detained and interrogated him.<sup>275</sup> “Once they figured out that I was voice acting again, this time their interaction with me was very bad because they said ‘You guaranteed three years ago not to do voice acting for Christian channels or do any work on Christianity but you’ve worked on a lot of books,’” Risbaf recalled.<sup>276</sup> Authorities threatened him with five to six years in prison, leading Risbaf to flee Iran.<sup>277</sup>

### *Access to the Bible*

Risbaf’s detention for the production of a bible audio book in Persian is in line with the Iranian government’s broader attempts to limit distribution and access to the Bible. In February 1990, authorities shutdown the Bible Society of Iran, the country’s primary translator, publisher and distributor of Persian-language bibles. Since then the sale, publication and import of the Bible has more or less been prohibited.<sup>278</sup> In the past three years there have been several instances of security officials arresting Christians for distributing bibles, confiscating bibles, and in some cases burning bibles.

Ali Golchin told the Campaign that authorities arrested him in part because he was distributing bibles. “The Ministry of Intelligence discovered that I had bibles kept in a storage unit in my home town and they confiscated all of them. [During my arraignment the judge asked me, ‘Why did you hold on to these

---

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Morad Mokhtari, Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, October 11, 2011; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Mansour Borji, Article 18, May 31, 2012.

books?’ I didn’t answer.”<sup>279</sup>

According to the Iranian Christian new agency *Mohabat News*, on October 29, 2010, the Revolutionary Guard Office of Investigation of Smuggled Goods confiscated and set ablaze more than 300 copies of the Bible in Derishak Village near the town of Salmas in northwest Iran.<sup>280</sup> On February 8, 2011, Revolutionary Guards allegedly confiscated and burned hundreds of bibles in Derishak.<sup>281</sup> On May 31, 2011, the IRGC stated on its website that hundreds of bibles found in Sardasht in West Azerbaijan were burnt.<sup>282</sup> Dr. Majid Abhari, Consultant of the Committee of the Majlis stated that 6,500 bibles were confiscated on the Zanzan-Abhar route.<sup>283</sup>

An Iranian Christian woman attends church.



Photo by Somayeh Abbasi, Iranian Photo News Agency

<sup>279</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Ali Golchin, June 1, 2012.

<sup>280</sup> “Once Again, the Islamic Republic of Iran Burned New Testaments!,” *Mohabat News*, March 14, 2011, [http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1355:once-again-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-burned-new-testaments&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279](http://mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1355:once-again-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-burned-new-testaments&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279) (accessed July 30, 2012).

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> “Widespread Distribution of the Bible and Torah Within the Country” (“Touzie Gostarkeh Anjil va Tourat dar Keshvar”), *Gerdab*, May 31, 2010, <http://www.gerdab.ir/fa/news/889/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B9-%DA%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%88-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1> (accessed July 30, 2012).

<sup>283</sup> “Warning About the Widespread Distribution of the Bible and Torah Copies Within the Country,” *Mehr News*, July 25, 2010, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1363115> (accessed July 30, 2012).

## DISCRIMINATION

### Non-Discrimination under International and Iranian Law

Article 26 of the ICCPR provides that: “All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall prohibit any discrimination and guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”<sup>284</sup> Article 26 also requires Iran, as a signatory to the ICCPR, to adopt laws and policies that protect individuals from discrimination within the private sector and in matters of education, housing, employment, and health.<sup>285</sup>

The Iranian constitution also provides for non-discrimination, stating in Article 20 that “All citizens of the country, both men and women, equally enjoy the protection of the law and enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, in conformity with Islamic criteria,” and in Article 19 “All people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights; color, race, language, and the like, do not bestow any privilege.”<sup>286</sup>

However, the Iranian government has failed to protect its Protestants from discrimination in many key areas, including employment, education, and access to justice. In some areas, including laws pertaining to marriage, family life, and violent crimes, Iranian law blatantly discriminates between Muslims and Christians.

<sup>284</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No.16) at 52, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force March 23, 1976, ratified by Iran in 1975, art. 26.

<sup>285</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 20, Non-discrimination in Economics, Social and Cultural Rights, U.N. Doc. E/C.12/GC/20 (2009), paras. 6 and 15.

<sup>286</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979, arts. 19 and 20.



## The Right to Work under International and Iranian Law

Article 6 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) protects the right to work. Under General Comment 18 of the ICESCR, the state must prevent discrimination in the workplace and discrimination in hiring and firing.<sup>287</sup>

The International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 158 concerning Termination of Employment defines the lawfulness of dismissal in Article 4, and imposes the requirement to provide valid grounds for dismissal, as well as the right to legal and other redress in the case of unjustified dismissal.<sup>288</sup> State parties have immediate obligations in regard to the right to work, such as the obligation to “guarantee” that it will be exercised “without discrimination of any kind” (Article 2, paragraph 2).

Similarly, Article 28 of the Iranian constitution states:

Everyone has the right to choose any occupation he wishes, if it is not contrary to Islam and the public interests, and does not infringe the rights of others.

The government has the duty, with due consideration of the need of society for different kinds of work, to provide every citizen with the opportunity to work, and to create equal conditions for obtaining it.<sup>289</sup>

Section 6 of the Iranian Labor Code states that “Iranians, whatever their tribe or ethnic group, enjoy the same rights; skin colour, race, language and the like do not constitute any privilege or distinction; all individuals, whether men or women, are entitled to the same protection of the law.”<sup>290</sup> Section 38 adds, “Any discrimination in wage determination on the basis of age, gender, race, ethnic origin and political and religious convictions shall be prohibited.”<sup>291</sup>

## Employment Discrimination in Iran

Nevertheless, among the most common forms of discrimination experienced by Protestants and converts is employment discrimination, both by the state and by private sector employers.

Six of the Christians interviewed for this report told the Campaign that they had either been fired from a job or refused employment because they were Christian. In some cases, employers were reportedly clear that the reason for termination or non-hire was related to the individual’s faith; in other cases this could be inferred from the circumstances.

Employers appear particularly sensitive to converts. In some cases, Christians who spoke to the Campaign had been terminated after speaking to coworkers about their faith, after evangelizing, or because of an employer’s fear or perception that the Christian was evangelizing. Most of the terminations report-

<sup>287</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 18, The Right to Work (Thirty-fifth session, 2005), para. 4.

<sup>288</sup> ILO Convention No. 158 concerning Termination of Employment Convention, June 22, 1982, entered into force November 23, 1985, art. 4(2).

<sup>289</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979, art. 28.

<sup>290</sup> International Labor Organization, “Islamic Republic of Iran,” <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/WEBTEXT/21843/64830/E90IRN01.HTM> (accessed July 30, 2012).

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

ed to the Campaign came after an employer learned of the worker's conversion to Christianity. Some Christians reported they had trouble getting a job because of their faith. Employment application forms in both the private and public sector always require applicants to report their religion. Family names also often serve as religious and ethnic markers, allowing most Iranians to be able to instantly infer whether or not someone is from an ethnic Christian, Muslim, or other background.

Voice actor Arian Risbaf told the Campaign that public and private sector employers often failed to hire him for projects after the employer and the local intelligence office learned of his religion and conversion.

For example, one time I auditioned for a voice-acting role. On the application form I wrote I was Christian. They asked, "How are you Christian with parents that have Muslim names?" I told them that we're Protestant; they didn't know what that meant and they didn't make a big deal of it. It wasn't until two weeks later when my application reached *Hirasat* [the local intelligence office] that they contacted me.

From the beginning I informed them that I hadn't enlisted in the mandatory military service and they said it's okay and it's not a problem. But [after *Hirasat* saw my application] they said that my military problem couldn't be solved. I said, "But we talked about this already," and they replied, "We apologize but we received a new directive that says that we cannot work together." From that I knew what the real reason was. Of the other men who auditioned, four others also hadn't enlisted in the mandatory military service but they were all hired; I was the only one who was not hired. Instances like this happened to me lot.

Since I worked independently with studios, I would go to a studio for a job and later, all of sudden, [the job] would disappear. Some would tell me that because I don't have a "real religion" they were scared to work with me, because of the difference in faith and because of the risks for themselves for working with an apostate. Also last year, after word spread of my faith, no government-owned or state-run entity would hire me.<sup>292</sup>

Iranian Christian rights advocates, leaders and journalists told the Campaign that such acts of employment discrimination are common, adding that Christians can also face obstacles starting a business and obtaining business loans.<sup>293</sup>

One church leader told the Campaign that some members of his church had been fired from private sector jobs after the Ministry of Intelligence called their employers and pressured the employers to fire them.<sup>294</sup>

Firouz Khanjani, who is Christian-born and a leader of a house church network called Church of Iran, worked as a journalist for the official state broadcaster Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). He told the Campaign that an Orthodox priest in Rasht filed a complaint with authorities alleging that Khanjani and others ran a network of house churches at the time.

<sup>292</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Arian Risbaf, November 11, 2011.

<sup>293</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Firouz Sadegh-Khanjani, January 4 and February 16, 2012; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Executive Director Shahab Ebrahimi, Farsi Christian News Network, December 7, 2011.

<sup>294</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Firouz Sadegh-Khanjani, January 4 and February 16, 2012.

The IRIB called me and said they have a complaint against me from [a priest] that I am active [in house churches] and I have to come explain myself.

My first meeting was with the Ministry of Intelligence in one of the IRIB buildings because that's where they had a security office. There were two Intelligence officers there, a manager, and three employees of IRIB. They asked about our activities, and why I wasn't Muslim. They suggested to us that we return to Islam.

They said, "We came at the right time because IRIB is giving you more responsibilities, but since you're Christian we cannot allow you to take on these responsibilities. However, if you work with us we can give you some advantages."<sup>295</sup>

Khanjani claimed that the Intelligence officer wanted him write a series of critiques attacking the theological tenets of the Central Assembly of God church, a recognized church that operates in Persian, which the Ministry of Intelligence would distribute in order to "create a divide within the church."<sup>296</sup> Khanjani told the Campaign he refused.

When I didn't provide the answers they wanted, they gave the order to the Political Undersecretary of IRIB to transfer me to the international broadcasting station, where I was for two years. Then in 2002, they didn't renew my employee ID card [which is needed to work at IRIB]. I asked them why and they replied, "We had some requests of you which you did not cooperate with, and so we did not renew your ID card."

I knew my [forced] termination had to do with my religion because my bosses were pleased with my work. . . . But no one directly told me I was being fired because of my faith; they said it was because of safety, which can be considered a type of code. Then after my card was not renewed, they told me it was because I didn't cooperate with them.<sup>297</sup>

Siavash, a 35-year-old technician from Rasht, told the Campaign that he was likely fired from his job at a manufacturing company because of his faith.

Six months after I converted I was fired from the company where I was working. No one said it was because of my faith. But in all the company there were only two of us that converted to Christianity. Our supervisor told my friend, who converted before I did, not to talk to anyone [about his faith] or he would face problems. But Christians that convert want to share their new happiness and faith with others, so because we shared our experiences, many found out we were Christian.

My friend and I were both terminated. Our contracts ended at the same time but they weren't extended. We were the only ones whose contracts were not extended. At that time the company's business was good, there was no reason say our work had gotten worse or our production numbers were low. I even got a commendation for my good work.<sup>298</sup>

<sup>295</sup> Ibid.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Siavash, December 5, 2011.

After being fired Siavash said he set up a repair shop but incurred problems trying to attain a business permit because of his faith.

I set up a repair shop in a small neighborhood. About a year later, I got two letters from the division of government, Edar-e Asnaf, overseeing whether or not businesses were operating legally [with a license]. In this neighborhood there were lots of businesses without licenses, but as far as I know I was the only one they contacted.

When I met with them, they asked me to fill out a form for a business license. I had left the religion line in the government application form blank. I explained my situation to the government and said I can't lie about my faith. They said if you write you're a Christian, you'll come in conflict with the government. You might incur the problems other [converts] have faced. If you leave it blank you know they [Edar-e Asnaf inspectors] might come and follow up. So I left it blank and they rejected my license.<sup>299</sup>

In some instances, particularly in government, employment discrimination is codified in law. Iran's constitution and judicial law require that certain public officials be Muslim, including the head of state—the Supreme leader—the president, judges, and all MPs except those slots designated for minority religious communities.<sup>300</sup>

## Right to Education in International and Iranian Law

Article 13 of the ICESCR “recognize(s) the right of everyone to education,” stating, “Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity.” The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights General Comment No. 13 mandates that “educational institutions and programs have to be accessible to everyone, without discrimination,” especially with regards to “the most vulnerable groups.”<sup>301</sup> Article 2 of the ICESCR makes clear:

The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to guarantee that the rights enunciated in the present Covenant will be exercised without discrimination of any kind as to race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.<sup>302</sup>

Article 30 of the Iranian constitution states, “The government must provide all citizen with free education up to secondary school, and must expand free higher education to the extent required by the country for attaining self-sufficiency.”<sup>303</sup>

In practice, however, Iran has systematically failed to protect the right to education for Protestants.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979, arts. 115, 144, and 163; Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Dorits de l'Homme (FIDH), *Discrimination Against Religious Minorities in Iran*, August 2003, [www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/ir0108a.pdf](http://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/ir0108a.pdf) (accessed August 6, 2012).

<sup>301</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 13, Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, U.N. Doc. E/C.12/1999/10 (1999), para. 6(b).

<sup>302</sup> International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 49, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force January 3, 1976, art. 2.

<sup>303</sup> Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979, art. 30.

## Discrimination in Education in Iran

Educational discrimination against Iranian Protestants typically involves expulsion from or denial of admissions to secondary school or universities, or refusal to grant a diploma despite completing course work.

Three of the Christians who spoke to the Campaign reported being expelled or denied secondary school or university enrollment because of their Christian identity. One of the three, Christian-born Daniel Shahri from Esfahan, told the Campaign he was expelled from elementary school and experienced trouble finding another school to enroll in.

In my third year of elementary school the principal called my father in and said we unfortunately can't register Daniel for his fourth year because the parents of the other students are complaining that he talks about Christianity with the children. It was a government school; I never went to private schools.

I eventually found another school but only after going from one school to another and to another until we found one that would accept me.<sup>304</sup>

The Moghadas church in Kerman collapsed in 2011.



Photo from the public domain

Kambiz K., a convert from Karaj, told the Campaign, "I was also expelled from school. At that time I was in the eleventh grade and my classmates and teachers found out that I was Christian. And I couldn't finish my last year and receive my diploma because of all these problems they created for me. My Quran teacher kicked me out of class and sent me to the principal's office, saying, 'This boy was a Muslim and now he's a Christian.' They even called the police to take me away."<sup>305</sup>

As a matter of policy, authorities bar Iranians from higher education as a form of punishment or a method of restricting the social advancement of students who partake in religious and political activities the government deems inappropriate.<sup>306</sup> Thus the banning of Protestant converts from higher education is just part of a broader policy in which the Iranian government bans higher education for thousands of members of the Baha'i faith and Iranian student activists.<sup>307</sup>

On a few occasions, education authorities appear to have applied similar methods of exclusion to

<sup>304</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Daniel Shahri, October 31, 2011.

<sup>305</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Kambiz K., April 4, 2011.

<sup>306</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, *Punishing Stars: Systematic Discrimination and Exclusion in Iranian Higher Education*, December 2010; Note: Iran's admission regulations, set by the parallel legislative body the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, mandate that university students belong to one of the official or recognized religions: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Zoroastrianism. The regulations also state that education authorities must deny university admission to an "enemy of the Islamic Republic" or those who "repudiate to be morally corrupt." Regulations also grant the Ministry of Intelligence, which is the primary state body responsible for monitoring and arresting Protestants, Baha'is, and political activists, a role in the admissions process.

<sup>307</sup> See International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, *Punishing Stars*.

remove Christian converts from institutions of higher education. *Mohabat News* reported that in November 2011, the Revolution Court in Moalem Street in Tehran sentenced Fatemeh Nouri, a Protestant convert and art student in a Tehran-based university, to one year of deprivation of education by the Revolutionary Court for “attending a house church, insulting sacred figures and activities against national security.”<sup>308</sup>

Ibrahim S. similarly told the Campaign that “My university found out I was Christian from the other college students, and I was unable to receive my bachelor’s degree, even though I finished all my classes. I found out it was because of my religion because my friend worked at the [registrar there] and he told me.”<sup>309</sup>

### *Mandatory Religious Education*

In Iranian primary and secondary schools, students are required to take Islam and Quran classes. Ethnic Christian children, namely those from Armenian and Assyrian backgrounds, are exempt from mandatory Islam classes and sometimes supplement credits with courses taught by their Church.<sup>310</sup> In some cases Armenians and Assyrians operate their own schools and set their own curricula.<sup>311</sup>

Christians from convert families, however, told the Campaign they were often not afforded the same right to exemption these other Christians experienced. Oman Fatai from Bandar Anzali explained:

We told the school that we didn’t want our daughter to sit in the religious classes. They assumed we were born Christian—not converts—so they had no objections.

In first grade, the school worked with us. By second grade there was more pressure on the churches, and I think the Department of Education told the schools to be aware of Christian converts who used to be Muslim and not to accommodate them. If they don’t want their child to sit in the religious classes do not register them or refuse to help. The principal told us that the Department of Education sent them a written decree ordering that they could not accommodate our situation. After . . . pleading . . . the teacher agreed to allow our daughter to not sit in the religious classes. By third grade they said there was no way around it; she had to sit in and learn this subject.<sup>312</sup>

Photo from the public domain



Pastor Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani was charged with apostasy, “propaganda against the regime,” and “insulting Islamic sanctities.”

The arrests of pastors Youcef Nadarkhani and Behrouz Khanjani came, in part, after they had appealed to various authorities, including the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Intelligence, and the Parliament, to have the government regard converts under the age of 18 as recognized Christians under the law.<sup>313</sup> The pastors wanted authorities to grant them the full rights afforded to eth-

<sup>308</sup> “Iranian Christian Convert Sentenced to One Year of Deprivation of Education,” *Mohabat News*, February 7, 2012, [http://mohabat-news.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=3954:iranian-christian-convert-sentenced-to-one-year-of-deprivation-of-education&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279](http://mohabat-news.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3954:iranian-christian-convert-sentenced-to-one-year-of-deprivation-of-education&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279) (accessed July 30, 2012).

<sup>309</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Ibrahim S., January 4, 2012.

<sup>310</sup> National Research Council, *The Experiences and Challenges of Science and Ethics: Proceedings of an American-Iranian Workshop* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2003).

<sup>311</sup> Amid Zanjani, “Religious Minorities in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Imam Reza (A.S.) Network*, <http://www.imamreza.net/eng/imamreza.php?id=6059> (accessed August 3, 2012).

<sup>312</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Oman Fatai, April 5, 2012.

<sup>313</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Firouz Sadegh-Khanjani, January 4 and February 16, 2012.

nic Christians, including exemption from mandatory Islam classes. To make their case, Nadarkhani and Khanjani collected religious edicts from top Shi'a scholars, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, saying that children under the age of maturity can choose their religion and be considered Christian and not "apostates."<sup>314</sup> Khanjani's brother told the Campaign that at first some authorities were open to this line of legal argument, but soon afterward the pastors were arrested and tried.<sup>315</sup>

## Discrimination in Marriage and Family Life

Iranian law regarding marriage and family life also discriminates against Christians (and all non-Muslims). These discriminatory provisions apply to all Christian groups including ethnic Christians. Article 881 of the Civil Code prohibits non-Muslims from inheriting property from Muslims.<sup>316</sup> The Article stipulates that if one of the heirs of a non-Muslim is Muslim, the latter (regardless of that person's relationship with the deceased) collects the entire inheritance, opposed to any other non-Muslim heirs.<sup>317</sup> One Christian convert who was in a dispute over inheritance with his step-siblings told the Campaign that he did not reveal his new faith to his family for fear of disinheritance.<sup>318</sup>

Article 1059 of the Civil Code prohibits marriage between a Muslim woman and non-Muslim man, though it allows marriage between a non-Muslim woman and a Muslim man.<sup>319</sup> Under Article 1192, a Muslim child guardian, usually a father or paternal grandfather, cannot appoint a non-Muslim to take over guardianship of their child upon their death.<sup>320</sup>

Christian rights advocates told the Campaign that they knew of Christian converts who had lost their child custody rights to their Muslim spouse in divorce proceedings because they were Christian.<sup>321</sup> Magda Montazami, who converted at a young age, wrote a personal testimony for the Elam Ministries website detailing her experience with custody. She explains:

[After our separation] every once in a while my husband would come to [my parents'] house [where I was living] to bring our daughter for a few hours, and then he would take her back again. One day he took her, but didn't bring her back. He argued that according to Islamic Law, as "an infidel" I was not fit to look after the child. In the meantime, he had also divorced me.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.; Religious opinion of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khomeini regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence with member of the Church of Iran, January 2010, unpublished on file with International Campaign for Human Rights; Religious opinion of Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence, October 2009, (on file with ICHRI); Religious opinion of Ayatollah Mousavi Ardabili regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence, (on file with ICHRI); Religious opinion of Ayatollah Gerami regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence, October 2009, (on file with ICHRI); Religious opinion of Ayatollah Gorgani regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence, October 2009, (on file with ICHRI); Religious opinion of Ayatollah Saafi Gulpaygani regarding religious conversion, in response to email correspondence, November 2009 (on file with ICHRI).

<sup>315</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Firouz Sadegh-Khanjani, January 4 and February 16, 2012.

<sup>316</sup> The Civil Code of Islamic Republic of Iran, *Daneshvar Publication*, 1928, [http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,legal,,legislation,irn,,49997a\\_db27,0.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,legal,,legislation,irn,,49997a_db27,0.html) (accessed August 3, 2012), art. 881.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid.

<sup>318</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with anonymous convert, August 3, 2012.

<sup>319</sup> "The Civil Code of Islamic Republic of Iran, *Daneshvar Publication*, 1928, [http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,legal,,legislation,irn,,49997a\\_db27,0.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,legal,,legislation,irn,,49997a_db27,0.html) (accessed August 3, 2012), art. 1059.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., art. 1192.

<sup>321</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Executive Director Shahab Ebrahimi, Farsi Christian News Network, August 14, 2012; International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with the Christian rights advocate Attieh Fard, Article 18, September 9, 2012.

I immediately hired a lawyer to regain custody of my daughter. She was just two and a half years old and my lawyer told me according to the Iranian constitution a little girl can stay with her mother up to the age of nine. But on the day of the court hearing, the judge told me that the law in the constitution did not apply in my case. The judge told me: “There’s only one way you can take custody of your daughter: If you come back to Islam and recant your Christian faith, we will give you your daughter.”

My lawyer was very happy. He urged me to accept the court offer and pretend I was not a Christian. It was a nightmare moment. On the one hand I really loved my daughter and wanted to get her back at all costs, but on the other hand I loved Jesus and had felt His living presence with me throughout my life. There was no way I could bring myself to deny Jesus. I told the judge that I would never deny Jesus. So the court ruled in favor of my husband and took my daughter away from me. This was the darkest chapter of my life.<sup>322</sup>

## Discrimination in the Penal Code

Iranian law also discriminates in matters of consensual and nonconsensual sex and in violent crimes. Under Article 225 of Iran’s pending new penal code, non-Muslim men who have consensual or non-consensual sex with a Muslim woman regardless of their marital status are subject to a mandatory death sentence, whereas Muslim men must themselves be married to be subject to capital punishment and their act must rise to rape or incest.<sup>323</sup> Similarly, the pending penal code, under Articles 232-235, sets a mandatory death sentence for non-Muslim men engaged in consensual or non-consensual penetrative or non-penetrative sex as an “active” participant with a “passive” non-Muslim male.<sup>324</sup> Muslim men engaged in “active” homosexual sexual acts only receive the death penalty when the act is penetrative and several circumstances are met regarding marital status.<sup>325</sup>

Under Article 383 of the pending code, if a male perpetrator kills a female victim, the victim’s next of kin must pay half a legally set value for life, called blood money, prior to exercising a victim’s right to demand a retributive execution of the perpetrator.<sup>326</sup> However, in cases where a non-Muslim man kills a Muslim woman, the perpetrator will not be entitled to half of the standard blood money compensation prior to his execution.<sup>327</sup>

## Access to Justice

Some of the acts of discrimination discussed above could in theory be challenged in court with a civil lawsuit, as could other abuses by private citizens, such as physical assault, which could be challenged in a criminal court. Yet interviewees told the Campaign that, as converts, they strongly believed they could not have access to courts because when it was revealed in court that they were converts, they would likely be seen as apostates. These Christians regularly expressed fear that a judge would see their “apostasy” as a misdeed outweighing whatever complaint they had against the other party.

<sup>322</sup> Elam Ministries, “Magda’s Choice,” <http://www.elam.com/articles/MAGDA-S-CHOICE/> (accessed July 4, 2012).

<sup>323</sup> New Islamic Penal Code of Iran, arts. 225 and 228.; HRW, *Iran: Codifying Repression*.

<sup>324</sup> New Islamic Penal Code of Iran, arts. 232-235.; HRW, *Iran: Codifying Repression*.

<sup>325</sup> New Islamic Penal Code of Iran, arts. 232-235.; HRW, *Iran: Codifying Repression*.

<sup>326</sup> New Islamic Penal Code of Iran, art. 383.; HRW, *Iran: Codifying Repression*.

<sup>327</sup> New Islamic Penal Code of Iran, art. 383; HRW, *Iran: Codifying Repression*.



Siavash explained to the Campaign why he did not bring suit against a family member who had physically assaulted him.

Let's say I steal something. And then later I hit your car and damage it. You'll sue me for the dent. If you say [to the judge], "Sir in the past I saw that this man has stolen something." The judge would respond, "His theft is not your concern. Focus on your suit which is the damage to your car."

But if my secondary act is apostasy or Christianity, the other side, whatever the suit might be, can say, "Mr. Judge, on top of everything he's a Christian convert." That judge would follow up on this accusation.<sup>328</sup>

---

<sup>328</sup> International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran interview with Siavash, December 5, 2011.



Photo by Somayeh Abbasi, Iranian Photo News Agency

A Christian woman prays in an Iranian church.

## CONCLUSION

The evidence of the systematic persecution of and discrimination against Protestants in Iran, in violation of international law and Iran's own constitution, is presented in great detail through first-hand testimony and documentation in this report. These violations demand international attention. The Iranian government has shown that it is responsive to international pressure, as reflected in the acquittal of Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani of apostasy. However, hundreds of Protestant converts continue to be prosecuted under vague national security charges and remain in danger of being charged with apostasy, and Protestants continue to be denied their basic rights in almost all walks of life. The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran calls upon the international community to hold Iran accountable for its rights violations and to take concerted action to protect and uphold the rights of the Protestant community in Iran.

# The Cost of Faith

Persecution of Christian  
Protestants and Converts in Iran

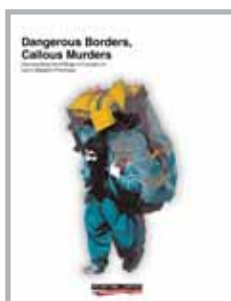
*In Iran, when you leave Islam for any other religion, you are identified as an apostate and, as the Iranian saying goes, your blood is haram (spoiled) and you can be executed.*

—Davoud Rostami, 29-year-old convert from Karaj

Despite the Iranian government's assertions that it respects the rights of its recognized religious minorities, the Christian community in Iran faces systematic state persecution and discrimination. The plight of Iranian Protestants is of particular concern; this community faces severe restrictions on religious practice and association, arbitrary arrests and detentions for practicing their faith, and violations of the right to life through state execution and extrajudicial killings.

In this report, the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran documents the rights violations of Protestant Christians in Iran within the context of international human rights law and the rights guaranteed within Iran's own constitution. The Campaign interviewed 31 Iranian Christians between April 2011 and July 2012 for this report, as well as lawyers who have represented Christians in Iran, Christian rights advocates, and Iranian Christian journalists. In addition, the Campaign reviewed primary documents including court verdicts, religious edicts from Shi'a clerics, and Iranian laws.

## Other reports by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran



**Dangerous Borders, Callous Murders:** Documenting the Killings of Couriers in Iran's Western Provinces



**Iran's Secret Hangings:** Mass Unannounced Executions in Mashhad's Vakilabad Prison



**Raising Their Voices:** Iranian Civil Society Reflections on the Military Option



**Monitoring Iran:** One Year into the Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran