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VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHTS OF CHRISTIANS IN IRAN

A Joint Report-January 2019



OpenDoors



ARTICLE 18



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VIOLATIONS OF THE RIGHTS OF CHRISTIANS IN IRAN

This report is the result of collaboration between Article18, Middle East Concern, CSW and Open Doors International.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2018, the Iranian Christian community, along with other religious minorities, continued to suffer multiple violations of their right to freedom of religion or belief. Ongoing surveillance of Christians by the authorities was often accompanied by harassment. The end of 2018 saw an unprecedented wave of raids on private house gatherings, leading to a large number of arrests. Many Christians received prison sentences, or had sentences upheld by the Court of Appeal. Most of the reported violations involved converts from Islam, but there were also several instances where members of the recognised Armenian and Assyrian Christian minorities were imprisoned or sentenced to jail terms due to their religious activities. Recognized church buildings remained closed to ethnic Persian Christians and, in several cases, church property remained under threat of confiscation.

INTRODUCTION - FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

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

1. 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.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.
4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

Although Iran ratified the ICCPR in 1975, it fails to uphold the values enshrined in it, including the right to freedom of religion or belief for all of its citizens. This report records the violations experienced by the Christian community during 2018.¹

¹ The details contained in this report are from public cases for 2018. Confidential cases have been omitted for security reasons and details on further incidents may still be forthcoming.

ONGOING VIOLATIONS OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Religious and political leaders in Iran continue to speak out against Christianity.² It is therefore unsurprising that the Christian community experiences repression in various forms. The Iranian intelligence service (MOIS) closely monitors Christian activity and, together with the Revolutionary Guard (IRCG), has raided Christian gatherings in private homes, arresting all in attendance and confiscating personal property. Those arrested have been subjected to intensive and often abusive interrogation.³ In June 2018, Christian convert Fatemeh Mohammadi released a letter detailing the sexually abusive interrogation she had undergone when she was arrested and detained in Evin Prison in Tehran.⁴

House church networks and the targeting of converts to Christianity

For nearly a decade, Persian Christians, who are generally converts from Islam, have been prohibited from entering official church buildings.⁵ They have consequently been forced to resort to informal meetings, frequently called “house churches”, which are regularly targeted by the security services. This prohibition, and the subsequent targeting of house churches, not only constitutes a violation of the right to freedom of religion or belief, but also of the right of peaceful assembly and association.⁶

Not only did the prohibition continue in 2018; there were also regular reports of house churches being raided, with a surge during November and December 2018 as arrests were reported in the cities of Ahvaz, Chalus, Damavand, Hamedan, Hashtgerd, Karaj, Mashhad, Rasht, Shahinshahr and Tehran. In one week alone, one hundred and fourteen Christians were reported to have been arrested.⁷

² “The head of the Islamic propaganda department of Qom Seminary in a meeting with Naser Makarem Shirazi said that fighting “evangelical Christianity” is part of our core issues,.” <http://mohabatnews.com/fa/?p=28208> . Accessed 12 November 2018,

³ “Iran: Four Christian Converts Detained,” <https://www.meconcern.org/2018/12/17/iran-four-christian-converts-detained/>. Accessed 1 January 2019.

⁴ “Christian Convert Describes Abusive Interrogation, Attempts to Force Her to Admit to ‘Illicit Sex’: Iran,” <https://www.christianpost.com/news/christian-convert-abusive-interrogation-admit-illicit-sex-iran-225485/> Accessed 19 November 2018.

⁵ “Farsi-Speaking Iranian Christians Banned From Attending Church,” <https://www.christianpost.com/news/farsi-speaking-iranian-christians-banned-from-attending-church-111986/>. Accessed 19 November 2018.

⁶ Articles 22 and 22, ICCPR

⁷ “Over 100 Iranian Christians Arrested by Intelligence Officials,” <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=4132>. Accessed 1 January 2019.

- In **March** 2018, twenty Christians associated with house churches were arrested in Karaj⁸ and six were detained.
- On 10 **April** 2018, Christian convert Mohammadali Yassaghi was arrested in Mazandaran Province, North Iran. He was held in Babol Prison, Mazandaran Province, on charges of "propaganda against the establishment." On 25 June 2018, Mohammadali Yassaghi was brought before a judge in the 102 Revolutionary Court of Babol. The judge acquitted him, rejecting the charges.⁹
- It was reported that on 17 and 18 **June** 2018 five Christian converts had been arrested in Karaj and West Tehran.¹⁰ Those arrested were named as Razmik Zadourian, Shahab Bani Bayat, Mohammad Mohaghegh Dolatabadi, Shahin Shakib, and Vahid Dehghani.
- On 16 **November** 2018, two Christian converts were arrested after arranging to hold a meeting in Mashhad. Behnam Ersali was arrested in Mashhad and Davood Rasooli was arrested in Karaj.¹¹
- On 30 **November** 2018 Jamshid Derakhshan, a Christian convert from Karaj, was arrested as he went to a house gathering in Hashtgerd. His family was unaware of his whereabouts for nearly two weeks. He was released on bail on 16 December and charged with "propagation of Zionist evangelical Christianity."¹²
- On 2 **December** 2018 four Christian converts were arrested in Ahvaz. Sisters Shima and Shokoofeh Zanganeh were arrested together with Farzad Behzadzadeh and Abdollah Yousefi. Shima and Shokoofeh Zanganeh were both physically assaulted during interrogation.¹³ Shokoofeh Zanganeh was released on bail of US\$44000 on 25 December, and Shima was released on bail of US\$44000 on 31 December 2018.¹⁴

⁸ "Christian Convert Arrested Earlier Still Detained Incommunicado," <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-christian-convert-majidzadeh-detained/29159028.html>. Accessed 1 January 2019.

⁹ "Iran: Mohammadali Yassaghi freed from detention," <https://meconcern.org/2018/07/05/iran-mohammadali-yassaghi-freed-from-detention/>. Accessed 19 November 2018.

¹⁰ "Disinformation and a Worrying Situation for some Detainees in Iran" (translation from Farsi), <http://fa.timesofisrael.com/iranchristiansarrested/>. Accessed 18 November 2018.

¹¹ "Two Christian converts, Behnam Ersali and Dawood Rasooli, were arrested in Karaj and Mashhad," <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=4121>. Accessed 1 January 2019.

¹² "Iranian Christian Convert Charged with Unfounded Allegations Temporarily Released," <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=4147>. Accessed 3 January 2019.

¹³ "Iran: Four Christian Converts Detained," <https://www.meconcern.org/2018/12/17/iran-four-christian-converts-detained/>. Accessed 1 January 2019.

¹⁴ "Shima and Shokoofeh Zanganeh Released on Bail," <http://mohabatnews.com/fa/?p=29247>. Accessed 3 January 2019.

- On 6 **December** 2018 intelligence agents raided the home of Amir Taleipour and his wife, Mahnaz Harati, arresting them in front of their 7-year old daughter.¹⁵
- In **December** 2018 nine Christian converts were arrested in Alborz province during Christmas celebrations.¹⁶

In 2018 there were many reports of Christians, mainly converts, being arrested. Those arrested often faced pressure to recant their faith or sign commitments not to meet with other Christians. Those who did not comply were detained and generally faced charges related to evangelism, engaging in “illegal” house churches or acting against “national security.” They were eventually released conditionally on payment of bail pending a court summons.¹⁷

As a result of the pervasive and ongoing repression, during 2018 Christian converts and those from ethnic minorities continued to flee the country.

Church closures and violation of property rights

In 2018 churches which used to hold services for Farsi-speaking Persian Christians remained closed. These include St. Peter’s Presbyterian Church and Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Tehran, Assemblies of God Central Church, Tehran, and Assemblies of God churches in Janat-Abad, Ahvaz, and Shahinshahr among others. In addition, the Assemblies of God retreat centre in Karaj, the Garden of Sharron, was issued a confiscation order on 7 March 2018.¹⁸

Imprisoned Christians

A number of Iranian Christians are either still serving prison sentences or were released in 2018. Several appealed their sentences during 2018. However, with few exceptions, the sentences were upheld.

¹⁵ “Iran: Christian Couple Arrested in Mashhad,” <https://meconcern.org/2018/12/18/iran-christian-couple-arrested-in-mashhad/>. Accessed 1 January 2019.

¹⁶ “Nine Evangelical Christians Reported Arrested During Christmas Week In Iran,” <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/evangelical-christians-reported-arrested-in-iran-during-christmas/29683786.html>. Accessed 1 January 2019.

¹⁷ The weakening Iranian currency means it is sometimes difficult to give accurate figures for bail demands from Iranian Christians, but typically the demands are between \$30,000 and \$120,000, and often house title deeds have to be submitted as collateral.

¹⁸ “Christian retreat seized center in favour of the Executive Headquarters of Imam’s Directive,” <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=3931>. Accessed 19 November 2018.

In January 2018 Naser Navard Goltapeh was detained and began serving a 10-year prison sentence in Evin Prison for “acting against national security through forming and establishing illegal house churches.”¹⁹

On 2 May 2018, Yousef Nadarkhani, Yaser Mosibzadeh, Zaman (Saheb) Fadaie and Mohammadreza Omidi were informed that the 10-year prison sentences given on 14 June 2017 at the 26th Branch of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran for “acting against the national security through propagating house churches and promoting Zionist Christianity” had been upheld.²⁰ On 22 July 2018, ten police officers arrived at Yousef Nadarkhani's home and physically assaulted Yousef Nadarkhani's son, Danial, when he opened the door to them. Both Yousef Nadarkhani and his son were tasered, despite offering no resistance.²¹ Mohammadreza Omidi and Zaman (Saheb) Fadaie were arrested on 24 July and Yasser Mosibzadeh on 25 July before being taken to Evin Prison to serve their sentences.²² The men had received no official summons prior to the arrests.

On 25 April 2018 there was a preliminary appeal hearing for Rev. Victor Bet Tamraz, an ethnic Assyrian, and Christian converts Kavian Fallah Mohammadi, Hadi Asgari and Amin Nader Afshari.²³ Rev. Victor Bet Tamraz, Kavian Fallah Mohammadi and Amin Nader Afshari were arrested at a private Christmas celebration on 26 December 2014. Amin Nader Afshari was re-arrested at a picnic in August 2016, together with Hadi Asgari and Ramiel Bet Tamraz (see below). In June 2017, Judge Ahmadzadeh sentenced Rev. Victor Bet Tamraz, Kavian Fallah Mohammadi and Hadi Asgari to 10-years' each for “conducting evangelism and illegal house church activities.” Amin Nader Afshari was sentenced to 15-years' imprisonment for “conducting evangelism, illegal house church activities and insulting Islamic sanctities.”

¹⁹ “Iran: Christians recently imprisoned in Tehran and Tabriz,” <https://www.meconcern.org/2018/02/19/iran-christians-recently-imprisoned-in-tehran-and-tabriz/>. Accessed 19 November 2018.

²⁰ “Iran: appeal unsuccessful for Rasht Christian converts,” <https://www.meconcern.org/2018/05/03/iran-appeal-unsuccessful-for-rasht-christian-converts/>. Accessed 18 November 2018.

²¹ “Iran: church leader arrested with unnecessary force,” <https://meconcern.org/2018/07/23/iran-church-leader-arrested-with-unnecessary-force/>. Accessed 18 November 2018,

²² “Iran: further arrests in Rasht,” <https://meconcern.org/2018/07/25/iran-further-arrests-in-rasht/>. Accessed 18 November 2018.

²³ “Iranian Christians Appeal Convictions By Islamic Court,” <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-christians-appeal-convictions-islamic-revolutionary-court/29017122.html>. Accessed 18 November 2018.

On 6 January 2018, Shamiram Issavi Khabizeh, the wife of Rev. Victor Bet Tamraz, was sentenced to 5-years' imprisonment for "membership of a group with the purpose of disrupting national security and another five years in prison for "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security."²⁴ An appeal is ongoing – the first session of the Court of Appeal has since been held.²⁵

In May 2018, Majidreza Souzanchi Kushani, a Christian convert detained in Evin Prison, was sentenced to 5-years' imprisonment for "membership of evangelistic groups and conducting evangelism."²⁶ Majidreza Souzanchi and Fatimeh Mohammadi, another Christian convert, had been arrested in November 2017.²⁷

On 20 June 2018, 12 Christian converts from Bushehr were given prison sentences of one year each for "propaganda activities against the regime through the formation of house churches."²⁸ They were also under intense pressure to recant their faith.

On 11 July 2018, Ramiel Bet Tamraz, son of Rev. Victor Bet Tamraz, was sentenced to prison for four months for "spreading Christian propaganda."²⁹ The sentence is being appealed.

On 22 September 2018, Zaman (Saheb) Fadaie – already serving a 10-year sentence in Evin Prison – received an 18-month prison sentence for "spreading propaganda against the regime." Fatimeh Bakteri received a 12-month sentence for the same charges.³⁰

²⁴ "Iranian Pastor's Wife Sentenced to Five Years in Prison for "Acting Against National Security,"" <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/01/iranian-pastors-wife-sentenced-to-five-years-in-prison-for-acting-against-national-security/>. Accessed 18 November 2018.

²⁵ "Iran: Update on appeal hearing for Shamiram Isavi Khabizeh," <https://www.meconcern.org/2018/05/09/iran-update-on-appeal-hearing-for-shamiram-isavi-khabizeh/>. Accessed 2 January 2019.

²⁶ "Determination of Branch and Time of Appeal for Majid Reza Suzanchi Kashan," <https://melliun.org/iran/177218>. Accessed 18 November 2018.

²⁷ "Two Detained Christians Still Held in Evin Prison," <https://www.en-hrana.org/two-detained-christians-still-held-evin-prison>. Accessed 18 November 2018.

²⁸ "Prison sentence was issued for "Payam Kharaman", another Christian convert in Bushehr," <http://mohabatnews.com/en/?p=4080>. Accessed 18 November 2018.

²⁹ "Jail for Iranian pastor's son found guilty of 'acting against national security,'" <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/07/iranian-pastors-son-jailed-for-acting-against-national-security/>. Accessed 18 November 2018.

³⁰ "Iranian Christians imprisoned for affirming Christian tenets," <https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/10/02/press/4089/article.htm>. Accessed 18 November 2018.

THE FOLLOWING TABLE INCLUDES CASES WHICH HAVE APPEARED IN PUBLIC REPORTS, AND DOES NOT CONSTITUTE A COMPREHENSIVE RECORD OF EVERY CHRISTIAN CURRENTLY DETAINED IN IRAN:

Name	Place	Detention began	Released	Length of prison sentence (if convicted)
Ebrahim Firouzi	Karaj	2013	-	5 years
Sevada Aghasar	Tehran	2017	-	5 years
Naser Navard Goltapeh	Tehran	Jan 2018	-	10 years
Hadi Asgari	Tehran	2016	April 2018 on bail	10 years
Majidreza Souzanchi Kushani	Tehran	2017	-	5 years
Ali Amini	Tabriz	2017	April 2018	
Fatemeh Mohammadi	Tehran	2017	April 2018	6 months
Yousef Nadarkhani	Tehran	July 2018	-	10 years
Aziz Majidzadeh	Tehran	March 2018	May 2018 on bail	
Mohammadali Yassaghi	Babol	April 2018	June 2018	
Yaser Mosibzadeh	Tehran	July 2018	-	10 years
Saheb Fadaie	Tehran	July 2018	-	10 years
Mohammadreza Omidi	Tehran	July 2018	-	10 years
Behnam Ersali	Mashhad	Nov. 2018		
Davood Rasooli	Karaj	Nov. 2018		
Shokoofeh Zanganeh	Ahvaz	Dec. 2018	25 Dec. 2018 on bail	
Shima Zanganeh	Ahvaz	Dec. 2018	31 Dec. 2018 on bail	
Farzad Behzadizadeh	Ahvaz	Dec. 2018		
Abdollah Yousefi	Ahvaz	Dec. 2018		
Jamshid Derakhshan ³¹	Karaj	Dec. 2018	16 Dec. 2018 on bail	
Amir Taleipour	Mashhad	Dec. 2018		
Mahnaz Harati	Mashhad	Dec. 2018		

³¹ Jamshid Derakhshan was detained with 7 others whose names have not been publicized.

Recommendations

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has an obligation under international law to respect, protect and fulfil the right to freedom of religion or belief. We therefore call:

- For the immediate and unconditional release of Christians detained on spurious charges related to their faith or religious activities, and
- For the government of Iran to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief for every citizen regardless of their ethnic or linguistic group, and including converts from other religions.
- We also call on members of the international community to assist in holding Iran accountable for upholding its obligation to ensure and facilitate freedom of religion or belief for all of its citizens by highlighting this principle during political or economic discussions with, or concerning, the nation.
- Finally, we ask the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to consider investigating and issuing a report on the ongoing mistreatment of Christians and other religious minorities in Iran.



OpenDoors