

Severe intensification of arrests and imprisonment of Christians in Iran

21 of the 33 Christians currently held in prison



Rasool Abdolahi Yasaman Yar-Ahmadi Mehdi Forootan Leila Akhavan Sara Akhavan Farshid Fathi Mohammad Zardouz Ladan Nouri Javad & Anahita Zare



Arash & Arezoo Kermanjani Rafi Nadipoor Mostafa Shokrollahi Vahik & Sonia Abrahamian Mojtaba Keshavarz Shahin Rostami Khalil Yar-Ali Nasrin Hosseini Nia Basir Amini

Pictures available

SECTION A: Details of recent arrests, imprisonments, prison conditions and threat of execution

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND IMPRISONMENT: JUNE 2010 - JANUARY 2011

Summary: At least 202 arbitrary arrests in 24 cities. At least 33 in prison as of 25th January 2011.

June 2010:

19 Christians arrested in Shiraz. Behrouz Sadegh-Khanjani is still in prison. Those released forced to sign papers not to attend church. 4 released on bail, cases not settled yet.

Source: Personal communications from Iran; www.persecution.org.

July 8th 2010:

15 Christians arrested in Mashad. All eventually released but forced to sign documents not to attend church.

Source: Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) Briefing Paper, January 2011; www.fcnn.com IRAN - The Mass Arrest of New Christian Converts in Mashad - 1st August 2010.

September 4th 2010:

10 Christians arrested in Hamadan. Arash Kermanjani and his wife Arezoo, and ethnic Armenians Vahik Abrahamian and his wife, Sonia remain in prison. Those released forced to sign documents not to attend church.

Source: www.fcnn.org - Christians Arrested in Hamadan, 22nd November 2010.

September – November 2010:

At least 70 others arrested and forced to sign similar documents in the cities of: Arak, Bandar Abbas, Bandar Mahshahr, Ardabil, Tabriz, Khoramabad, and Elam. Mojtaba Kashavarz and Shahin Rostami Azar-Kordi (diabetic) still in prison in Arak for over 3 months.

Source: Personal communications and CSW Briefing Paper January 2011.

December 24th, 2010:

11 Christians arrested in Dezfool and Andimeshk. Noorollah Ghabitizadeh still in prison. Those released forced to sign documents not to attend church.

Source: Mohabat News, January 21st, 2011.

December 26th, 2010:

Up to 13 Christians arrested and questioned in Rasht, Anzali, Urumieh, and Yazd. When released forced to sign documents not to attend church.

22 Christians arrested in Tehran. 12 still in prison:

Javad and Anahita Zare, Leila Akhavan, Sara Akhavan, Mehdi Forootan, Ladan Nouri, Farshid Fathi, Mohammad Zardouz, Nasrin Hosseini Nia, Rasool & Maryam Abdolahi, Davood Abdi. Those released forced to sign documents not to attend church.

4 Christians arrested in Isfahan. 3 still in prison: Yasaman Yar-Ahmadi, Basir Amini, Rafi Nadipoor. 1 released on bail, case not settled.

15 Christians in Tehran, Isfahan and Karaj, not at home when officials arrived to arrest them: their homes entered by force, personal items such as computers and ID papers confiscated, and pictures of Jesus Christ desecrated. Government seals placed on the front doors ordering the Christians to report to the police. Other family members warned that if the wanted Christians did not report to the police, they would face serious consequences.

Source: Personal communications from Iran; www.elam.com; CSW Briefing Paper January 2011.

December 31st, 2010:

Pastor Leonard Keshishian (ethnic Armenian) arrested in Isfahan, kept in prison till January 22nd, 2011.

Source: Personal communications from Iran; Mohabat News January 2011.

January 2011:

3 Christians arrested in Ahvaz. Mostafa Shokrollahi and Khalil Yar-Ali still in prison.

3 Christians arrested in Mashad, still in prison.

3 Christians arrested in Karaj. Arastoo Farokh Samani still in prison.

1 Christian arrested in Robat Karim. Abraham Firouzi still in prison.

2 Christians arrested in Rasht, still in prison.

2 Christian arrested in Shiraz, freed on bail.

1 Christian arrested in Isfahan, released.

Up to 20 Christians arrested in Khorasan Razavi, 1 in prison.

Source: *Personal communications from Iran.*

CONDITIONS IN PRISON

Christians are normally subjected to:

- Solitary confinement.
- Sleep deprivation.
- Many hours of interrogation by different teams.
- Loud speakers outside their cells constantly broadcasting religious teaching.
- Threats of execution, harm to family members.
- Pressure to recant their Christian faith.
- Verbal insults.
- Other forms of psychological torture.
- Sometimes prolonged beating.
- Denial of medical attention.

Source: *Reports to Christian agencies, also see www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article6839335.ece quoting UN human rights expert - "We are repeatedly receiving credible reports of harsh beatings, sleep deprivation and alleged torture to extract false confessions in Iranian jails," said Steve Crawshaw, UN director of Human Rights Watch.*

EXECUTION¹

November 13th, 2010: Yousef Nadarkhani, pastor of a church in Gilan province was sentenced to death. He was arrested in October 2009 and is held in Lakan prison. There is an appeal.

Source: *Church Times, 21st January 2011; www.farsinet.com December 7th, 2010 (with court documents).*



December 20th, 1990: Rev. Hossein Soodmand was executed in Mashad prison.

Source: *The Telegraph, October 11th, 2008.*



¹ After China, Iran has the highest rate of execution in the world. This year there have already been 57 death sentences carried out. See Amnesty International Report on Iran 2010 and <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/01/19/iran.executions/>

SECTION B: Statements from Iranian officials regarding Christians

The following articles containing various statements have been translated from the original Persian into English.

31st May 2010:

Centre For Survey Of Organized Crime confirms burning of Bibles and New Testaments

Versions of the 'distorted'² New Testament and Torah (the Bible) have entered the country from the western borders. One of the security officials in a meeting in western Azerbaijan has announced this and emphasised that the occupiers (referring to the US forces in Iraq) have an important role in this: "They bring these books in the country via our borders with Iraq." He stated that some of these books are distributed in that region and some are smuggled in other regions of the country. The official stated that within the last few months hundreds of copies of the distorted New Testaments and Torah, while entering the country from Sardasht border area, were discovered and consequently burned. He requested people to be aware of this.

Source: Website of Gerdab.ir, from the newspaper Vatane Emrooz number 343, page 3.

10th August 2010:

Ayatollah Seyed Hosseini Boushehri, member of the Assembly of Experts and leader of Friday prayers in Qom calls house churches³ work of the 'enemy'

Ayatollah Hosseini Booshehri has warned against the public tendency towards Christianity and the spread of house churches in many cities of Iran, especially in Qom. He stated, "Today the global aggressors have accurately planned and invested resources for these purposes. This is why in our country there is a strong inclination towards Christianity." He added: "Our enemy through its planning has been able to advance the house churches in many cities of our country."



Source: Arya News Agency; Arman Newspaper 1405 19th Mordad 1389.

23rd September 2010:

The Minister of Information Hojjatoleslam Heidar Mosehi confirms growth of house churches

The Minister of Information said, "If in the past they were only a few hundred people, today they come against our Islamic seminaries and our thinkers in an intellectual way." He warned: "Today a great many people who have recently become Christians were one day genuine believing Shiites and of the descendants of the Prophet. The enemies drew them with a calculated intellectual way to Turkey and baptized them as Christians."



Source: Emrouz Newspaper, 25th September, 2010; BBC Persian website, 24th September 2010.

² Some Islamic leaders would argue that all Christian Scriptures are distorted. The Bibles and New Testaments confiscated are recognised translations. The actions of the Iranian authorities are comparable to a Western government burning recognised translations of the Koran.

³ Rev. Samuel Yeghnazar speaking to BBC Persian on January 7th 2011 explained that Christians would like to meet in normal church buildings, but severe restrictions had forced them to meet in homes. He said, "during the 31 years of the Islamic republic of Iran permission has not been granted for the building of even one church." See <http://www.elam.com/film/iranmag/BBC.mp3>

3rd October, 2010:

Government website alarmed at growth of church in Mashad

Javan Online claims: "Reports state there are purposeful and targeted efforts to expand the house churches in some of the religious cities. In the last few months the planting of house churches in Mashad has expanded and reports reveal that 200 house churches in this city have been discovered."

Source: Khorasan Newspaper, 2nd October 2010, quoting Javanonline.

17th October 2010:

Hojjatolislam Mohammad Javad Fazel Lankarani, member of the theological faculty in Qom, demands action against house churches

"Bearing in mind the importance of the city of Qom and even many cities in the country because of their spiritual importance the enemies have made a vast investment and the activities of the Christians in Qom and some other cities like Mashad are an example of that. And in this direction they have made so much investment that today we are witnesses of the activities and expansion of the house churches. He further stated that this rings a serious bell of warning and the responsible officials of the country for the protection and preservation of the religious cities should have a special plan."



Source: Pars News Agency 17th October 2010.

October 19th 2010:

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamanei warns large crowd in Qom against Christians

"Because they (Iran's enemies) want to diminish the faith of people towards Islam and the sacred things of Islam by different means within the country they work to shake the foundation of the faith of people, especially the young generation with the spread of loose and shameless life styles, to the promotion of false mysticism - the fake type of real mysticism - to the spread of Baha'ism, to the spread of the network of house churches. This is what the enemies of Islam are up to with tact and calculation and careful study; their sole goal is to weaken the religion within the society."



Source: www.irna.ir 19th October, 2010; BBC Persian website, 19th October 2010.

January 4th, 2011:

Governor-General of Tehran, Morteza Tamadon, announced the arrests of Christians and calls the evangelical movement 'deviant'



The governor of Tehran called the spread of false deviant and corrupt sects a cultural invasion and clarified: "The so called evangelical movement that we recently confronted is a true example of this and our final blow towards them is imminent."

About confronting the enemies' cultural invasion he said: "Many false, deviant and corrupt sects are ready to pounce and attack the centre of our belief and we can see a sample of their activities among our youth in some areas."

The governor further added: "One of these current activities is the deviant and corrupt action of those who spread their thoughts under the cover of evangelistic activities through cultural institutes based in England."

The president of the Security Council for the province of Tehran, pointing to confrontations with evangelistic activities that have recently taken place in the province noted: "The leaders of these activities have been trapped and many more will be arrested in the near future."

He further added: "They (the evangelical churches) just like the Taliban and Wahhabis have placed themselves within the religion of Islam like a pest and under the cover of Christianity and with the support of England they have designed a movement. But with the help of God they were quickly identified and have encountered our initial blows."

Source: www.irna.ir 4th Jan 2011. Speech widely reported by all major news agencies.

SECTION C: General background regarding the Islamic Republic and Christianity

Ayatollah Khomeini set the tone for the Islamic Republic's attitude towards Christianity when he asked of all churches associated with missionaries (Anglicans, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics), 'Is it not our duty to destroy all these sources of danger to Islam?'⁴

The last thirty one years have been marked by intimidation and outright violence especially towards Protestant Christians⁵.

Churches have been closed; the Bible Society (founded in 1816 in Iran) was shut in 1990; printing the Bible and Christian literature is illegal; Bibles and Christian literature are confiscated and burned; arbitrary arrests; at least seven Christian leaders killed; one executed.

Under Ayatollah Khomeini (1979 - 1989) Rev. Arastoo Sayyah and Bahram Dehqani were murdered.

Under Ayatollah Khamanei (1989 -) Rev. Haik Hovsepian-Mehr, Rev. Tateos Michaelian; Mehdi Dibaj; Bagher Yousefi; and Gourbandori Tourani were murdered. Rev. Hossein Soodmand was executed in Mashad prison.

After the murder of Bagher Yousefi Iranian church leaders decided to strengthen home fellowships due to the severe restrictions and danger facing Christians meeting in normal church buildings.

Under President Khatami (1997 - 2005) the intimidation of Christians was less.

President Ahmadinejad (2005 -) the persecution of Christians increased.

In one year (2008 - 2009) there were at least 80 cases of Christians facing arbitrary arrest reported to human rights organisations⁶. Detailing the 202 arrests made in the last six months, this document shows there has been a definite intensification of the persecution of Christians.

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⁴ 'Iran and Christianity' by Mark Bradley, Continuum 2008, Chapter 9, page 164.

⁵ See 'Iran and Christianity' by Mark Bradley, Continuum 2008, Chapter 9 for full survey of intimidation against Christians under the Islamic Republic.

⁶ Elam Ministries, FCNN website.