



ANNUAL REPORT 2020

RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST
CHRISTIANS IN **IRAN**



Open *Doors*



CSW everyone
free to believe

A Joint Report - January 2021



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2020, Iranian Christians, along with other religious minorities, continued to suffer multiple violations of their right to freedom of religion or belief. The Covid-19 crisis had little impact on the repressive measures taken against Christians and other religious minorities.

Christians – mainly Persian-speaking Christians¹, but also members of the Armenian and Assyrian communities – continued to be treated as criminals on account of the peaceful practice of their faith. They were exposed to harassment, arrest, interrogation, and pressure to

recant or to commit to refrain from meeting other Christians or engaging in Christian activity. They faced prison sentences of up to 10 years, compelling many victims to flee the country after all legal avenues had been exhausted.

Iranian Christians permitted conditional release while the judicial process was still underway were subjected to high (e.g. US\$40,000–60,000) and sometimes extraordinarily high (\$220,000) bail demands (the minimum annual salary in Iran is under \$1,500).



¹ In this report the term “Persian-speaking Christians” is used to denote either converts, or ethnic Christians ministering to converts, as opposed to regular members of the recognised Armenian and Assyrian minorities in Iran.

Besides custodial sentences, Christians were also handed down terms of exile in remote parts of the country, prohibited from higher education, and forbidden to work in a particular employment sector. A court also ruled that a Christian-convert couple was not fit to have custody of their adopted daughter.

In the first few months of 2020, a few Christians were among those released early from prison on account of the Covid-19 pandemic, but many with longer prison sentences were refused temporary leave, despite severe overcrowding in the prisons and multiple positive cases of Covid-19 as the contagion spread among prisoners. In the summer of 2020, one Christian prisoner tested positive for Covid-19 and several others displayed symptoms but were not given tests. Some of the Christian prisoners are over 50 years of age or have experienced previous health issues, therefore placing them in the vulnerable category.



| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Population: | 80,946,000 |
| Official religion: | Shia Islam |
| Other religions: | Sunni Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Bahá'í Faith, Mandaism, Yarsanism, ... |
| Christians: | Approximately 800,000 |

Persian-speaking Christians continued to be denied access to recognised church buildings by the state authorities and there were multiple reports of the status of church property and Christian cemeteries being threatened and subjected to damage or demolition.

This report records the violations experienced by the Christian community during 2020. Confidential cases have been included in totals for numbers arrested, etc.

INTRODUCTION

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF
UNDER NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

Iran is a diverse country, home to a rich variety of religious and ethnic groups whose presence in the area is historically established. However, since the 1979 revolution the government has been trying to impose a homogeneous Iranian identity with an Islamic Shi'a belief system, resulting in the repression of minority groups – their culture, traditions, religious beliefs, and whatever else is considered a threat to the Islamic Republic and its values.

The first article of the Iranian constitution institutes a theocracy, with Article 12 establishing the Twelver Ja'fari school of Shi'a Islam as the nation's official religion.

Accordingly, all Iranian laws must be derived from and be consistent with Islamic law.

Article 13 of the constitution states:

“

Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are considered the only recognised religious minorities. They may exercise their religious ceremonies within the limits of the law. They are free to exercise matters of personal status and religious education and follow their own rituals.

Aside from Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity, no other religious minorities are recognised by law or afforded any rights under the Iranian constitution.

Moreover, the government views the recognised Christian minority as comprising only ethnic Assyrians and Armenians, who are considered part of the historical heritage of the nation. These minorities are not, however, allowed to hold services - or possess religious materials - in Persian, nor to allow converts to attend.

In 2020 a comprehensive survey of Iranians' attitudes towards religion, conducted by a secular Netherlands-based research group, showed that 1.5% of Iranians from a sample size of 50,000 self-identify as Christians. This research

supports our previous estimations that there are around 800,000 Christians in Iran overall. Ethnic Assyrian and Armenian Christians account for approximately 130,000, the remainder being converts from Islam. With only four remaining Persian-speaking churches across the country - and even these strictly monitored to ensure no new members join - the vast majority of converts either gather in informal meetings in private homes, known as "house-churches", for prayer, worship and Bible study, or are forced to remain isolated and disconnected from other Christians.

Iran ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1975, without reservation. Article 18 of the ICCPR provides guarantees for the safeguarding of religious freedom:



ARTICLE 18 OF ICCPR

- » 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.
- » No-one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
- » 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.
- » 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.



CRIMINAL PROCEDURE FACED BY CHRISTIANS

In Iran, the promotion of any faith besides Shi'a Islam is regarded as criminal activity and hence Christians face criminal procedure if they are assumed to be promoting their faith among Persians. In addition, Christian converts are liable to be treated as criminals both on account of their conversion and by practising their right under Article 18.1 of the ICCPR to manifest their religion "in community with others".

Iran fails to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief for its citizens as enshrined in the ICCPR. Christians are typically penalised under the following provisions of the Islamic Penal Code:



498

Anyone, with any ideology, who establishes or directs a group, society, or branch, inside or outside the country, with any name or title, that constitutes more than two individuals and aims to perturb the security of the country, if not considered as a "mohareb"², shall be sentenced to two to 10 years' imprisonment.



499

Anyone who joins, as a member, any of the groups, societies, or branches aforementioned in Article 498, shall be sentenced to three months to five years' imprisonment, unless it is proved that he had been unaware of its aims.



500

Anyone who engages in any type of propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran or in support of opposition groups and associations, shall be sentenced to three months to one year of imprisonment.



513

Anyone who insults the sacred values of Islam or any of the Great Prophets or [12] Shi'ite Imams or the Holy Fatima [Muhammad's daughter], if considered as "Saab ul-nabi" [blasphemy], shall be executed; otherwise, they shall be sentenced to one to five years' imprisonment.

² The Islamic Penal Code defines a *mohareb* as: "Any person resorting to arms to cause terror, fear or breach public security and freedom will be considered as a *mohareb* and to be 'corrupt on Earth'."

Criminal procedure against Christians tends to include some or all of the following:

MONITORING

Iranian intelligence monitors the activities of religious minorities, including Christians. Although ethnic Christians (Armenians and Assyrians) can congregate and conduct religious services in their own languages, even these are monitored and subject to control from the state, while converts are prohibited from attending.

Christian converts are forbidden from participating in recognised church services and collectively therefore must express their faith in secret, in the so-called “house-churches”. Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) actively tries to infiltrate these house-churches through government agents or informants.

The state also monitors the communication between Iranian citizens and international Christian media broadcasts. Christian media organisations have reported that the Iranian government tries to infiltrate them and identify enquirers. According to the president of Heart4Iran Ministries, Mike Ansari, an estimated 20% of enquiries they receive are from intelligence agents.

Internet activity is monitored by the state and in 2020 proposed amendments to articles 499 and 500 of the Islamic Penal Code, frequently cited in prosecutions of Christians, were intended to criminalise online engagement perceived to be “deviant psychological manipulation” or “popaganda contrary to Islam”, whether in the “real or virtual sphere”. Members of “sects” (as determined by the state) could then be punished with imprisonment, flogging, fines, or even the death penalty. The parliament passed the bill in May 2020, but the Guardian Council returned the bill to parliament in July, seeking clarification on eight specific points. In November the parliamentary bill was returned to the Guardian Council after examination from a special committee, and the Council has demanded further changes. The intention of the state is clearly to increase monitoring and repression of religious minorities.

As another example of the intense scrutiny on all Christian activities, an Iranian football referee revealed in an interview in 2020 that he had been accused of engaging in “Christian propaganda” and asked if he had converted to Christianity because he had officiated at the final of an annual Iranian-Armenian football competition.

The use of **MONITORING & SURVEILLANCE** against Christians in Iran



The state and its intelligence agencies actively monitor Christian activities to curtail their growth

- Monitoring official churches
- Monitoring active Christians
- Infiltrating house-churches
through agents or informants
- Monitoring communication between Iranian citizens
- Intercepting communication with international
Christian media broadcasts.



“ An estimated 20% of enquiries received are from intelligence agents. ”

Mike Ansari, the President of Heart4Iran Ministries

- Monitoring Internet activity

“ In 2020 Iran's parliament proposed amendments to articles 499 and 500 of the Islamic Penal Code, which are frequently cited in prosecutions of Christians. ”

“ These amendments were intended to criminalise online engagement perceived to be “deviant psychological manipulation” or “propaganda contrary to Islam”, whether in the “real or virtual sphere”. Those found guilty could then be punished with imprisonment, flogging, fines, or even the death penalty. (the amendment is still under review) ”



ARREST

In 2020, 52 Iranian Christians were publicly reported to have been arrested with regards to their Christian identity and/or activity, while at least a further 63 went unreported.

Arresting officials are usually from the MOIS, Revolutionary Guard Corps, or the police. Those responsible for arrests are legally obliged to produce a warrant, but frequently fail to do so. Sometimes Christians are summoned to security offices and arrested there, but arrests are often made during raids on house-churches.

INTERROGATION

Iran's Intelligence Minister openly admitted in 2019 to summoning Christian converts for questioning about why they had converted, a clear breach of Article 23 of Iran's constitution, which states that "no-one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief". Interrogation after arrest is often abusive, with Christians often being detained in solitary confinement in security offices maintained by the MOIS or Revolutionary Guard Corps. Emotional and psychological abuse during interrogation are commonly reported, while sexual harassment and physical assaults, though less common, have also been reported. Christian convert Fatemeh (Mary) Mohammadi was one of 12 female prisoners of conscience to detail the psychological abuse suffered during interrogation and solitary confinement as part of a 2020 book on "white torture" inside Iran's prisons.

During interrogation, there is pressure on Christian converts to recant or sign a commitment to refrain from Christian activities. Those who make such a commitment are often unwilling to publicise it, but in 2020 several Christians reported in confidence that they had been put under pressure to agree to such a restriction on their religious freedom.

CRIMINAL CHARGES

Once Christians are brought before the public prosecutor, they typically face charges related to “national security”. In 2020 the charges faced by Christians included: “propaganda against the regime”, “action against national security”, “spreading ‘Zionist’ Christianity”, “acting against national security by promoting ‘Zionist’ Christianity”, and “acting against national security through participation in establishing evangelistic ‘Zionist’ house-churches”.

BAIL DEMANDS

After being charged, Christians may be released conditionally on submission of bail. The bail demands are often so high that they necessitate the submission of property deeds. If the family is unable to meet the bail demand, it can be reduced on appeal while the Christian remains in detention. However, bail demands have also been increased during the judicial process.

SENTENCES

The Iranian judiciary typically applies custodial sentences of between three months and 10 years, depending on which articles of the Islamic Penal Code the Christians are judged to have violated. In addition, other punishments such as a term of internal exile or a work restriction may be handed down.

APPEALS

In 2020 appeal courts reviewed the sentences handed down to several Christians. In most cases the appeal court upheld the original verdicts and sentences. Occasionally, the appeal court reduced sentences under review. The appeal court has also, though rarely, been known to overturn sentences against Christians.

2020 INCIDENTS

 **41** Incidents reported

 **237** Individuals affected

 **115** Christians arrested

 **38** Detained

\$1,197,500
Bail demanded

1,760 months
Prison sentences
(for 44 individuals)

45 months
Suspended prison sentences
(for 4 individuals)

59 months
Exile (for 3 individuals)

160
Lashes (for 2 individuals)

JUDICIAL RULINGS 2020

3 *Acquitted*

4 *Reduced prison sentences*

6 *Early conditional release*

8 *Short furlough approved*

29 *Temporarily released on bail*

COURTS ALSO DENIED INDIVIDUALS' OTHER RIGHTS


Association

17

Denied the right to membership of any association


Education

4

Denied higher education or school registration


Adoption

2

Denied the right to adopt a child


Work

22

Denied the right to work

TRENDS

In 2020 Christians, especially converts from Islam, continued to be subjected to repression from the Iranian authorities in violation of their religious liberty, being harassed, charged with criminal activity and sentenced for the peaceful expression of their faith. This repression impacts Iranian Christians in multiple areas, preventing them from living a normal life, free from fear.

Iran was hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and, in an attempt to control the contagion in the prison system, 85,000 prisoners were temporarily released in March, according to judiciary spokesman Gholamhossein Esmaili. At least seven

Christians were among them and were later informed that they were not required to complete their sentences. However, calls for the temporary release of 10 more Christian converts serving prison sentences of five years or more were ignored, including four whose cases were subject to a retrial.

Christians, in common with other religious minorities, continued to be deprived of educational opportunities. In October, Christian convert and activist Mary Mohammadi, who was expelled from university in December 2019, commented on how this has affected her life:



“

Whether you've been denied entry to school or university, or kicked out, deprivation of education is like life imprisonment or exile that has been issued in absentia, or the verdict of a court case you haven't even been allowed to read.

Christians also faced limitations regarding employment. For example, in June 2020 seven Christian converts in Bushehr were handed down sentences that included restrictions on work.

In addition to the sentences they received on charges of “propaganda against the state”, two of the converts, Sam Khosravi and wife Maryam Falahi, lost custody of their daughter, Lydia, whom they had adopted from an orphanage in February 2019 when she was just three months old. “We have looked after our daughter for nearly two years,” they said, “and even the judge admitted an 'intense emotional tie' has been established between

us. After taking her away, based on their own assessment, Lydia will face an 'uncertain future', yet they insist on separating us from one another. This will have an immense emotional toll on all of us, and most importantly on Lydia.”

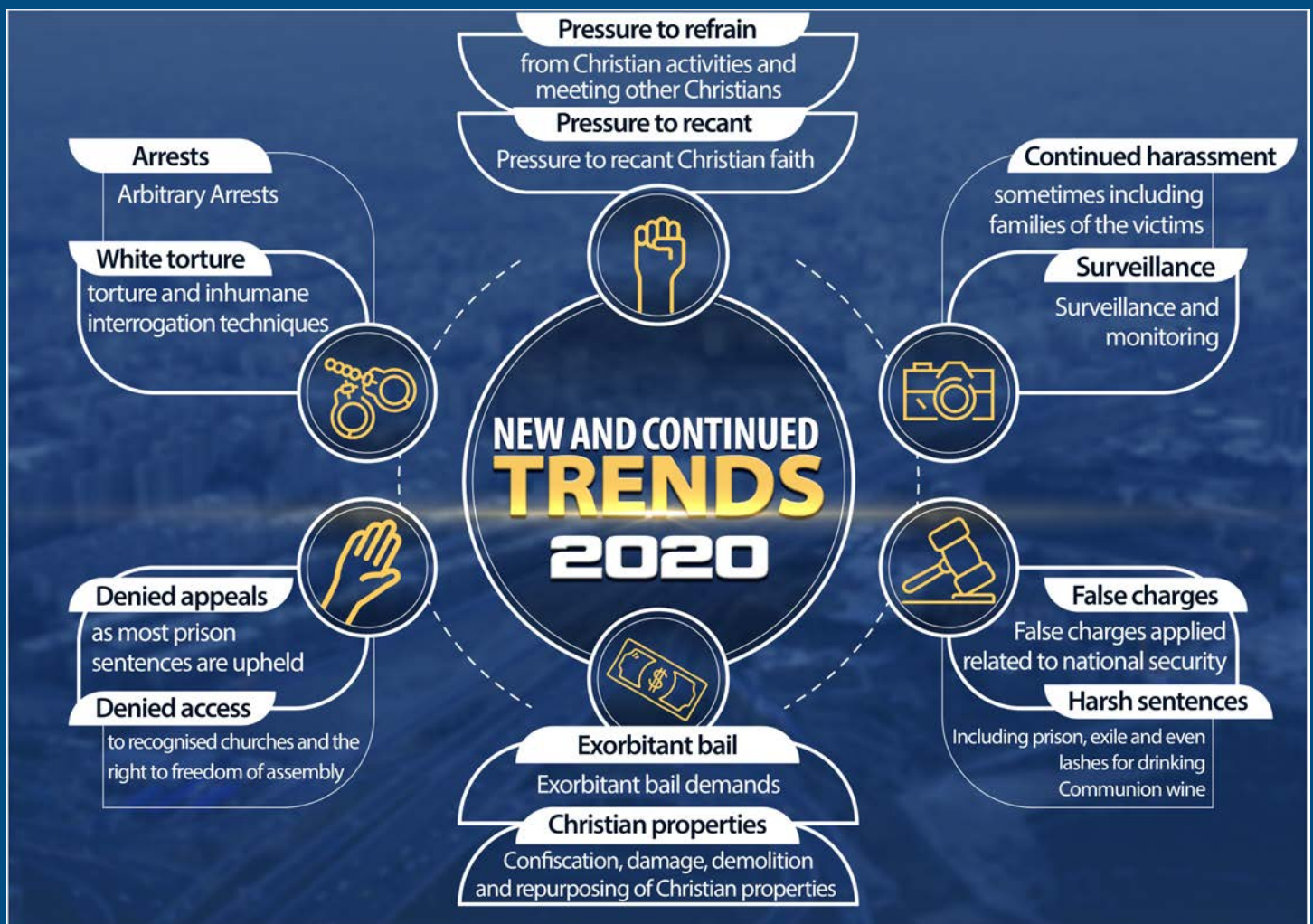
Internal exile also became a notable feature of judicial punishments handed down to Christian converts in 2020, including Sam Khosravi and his brother Sasan. Presently two Christian converts are serving terms of two years of internal exile, while two others face exile following the conclusion of their prison terms. If Sam and Sasan’s appeals fail, they too will face exile after prison.

“

The constitution, mother of all laws, in its 19th article explicitly speaks of the equality of all Iranian citizens and nationals, regardless of their race, language, religion, etc., such that belonging to a particular religion can never be a source of superiority or discrimination.

An extract from a letter signed by 120 lawyers and activists, calling for the decision to be overturned.





Corporal punishment was also administered in 2020 to two Christian converts, who were given 80 lashes each in consequence of a sentence they received in 2016 for drinking wine as part of Holy Communion.

Christians were also subjected to extreme bail demands for their conditional release from detention pending a court summons. In one case, the bail demand for four Christians was 7 billion tomans (approx. \$220,000) each - the most ever demanded for an Iranian Christian's bail. The judge reportedly told them: "Your actions are worthy of death! Who set this low bail amount for you [it was 800 million tomans previously], so you could be free to roam about on the streets?"

Several Iranian Christians reported that they had effectively been forced out of the country through the prospect of serving unjust and lengthy prison sentences.

Those Christians compelled to flee and seek asylum in other countries face many hardships and uncertainties about their future. In July, a joint report by World Relief and Open Doors revealed that since 2015 the United States had reduced the number of Iranian refugees accepted for resettlement by 97%. This reduction has impacted the resettlement procedure overall so that many Iranian Christians who have fled Iran are in limbo, usually in Turkey, with little prospect of resettlement in the near future. Furthermore, the conditions in Turkey are becoming

increasingly challenging for asylum seekers, whether because of the struggling economy or limited access to public healthcare, restricted to one year after registering for international protection, except in special circumstances.

Christians in Iran continued to face challenges in obtaining Bibles and Christian literature in 2020. Bibles and other Christian literature were consistently confiscated in searches by Iranian intelligence agents.

Iranian Christian converts also reported intimidation through being summoned to security offices for questioning about their faith.

For a decade, access to official church buildings has been restricted to the recognised Armenian and Assyrian Christian minorities and Persian-speaking Christians have consequently been forced to resort to meeting in the so-called “house-churches”, which are regularly targeted by the security services. This restriction, and the targeting of house-churches, constitutes a violation of the right to peaceful assembly and association (Article 21, ICCPR), as well as violating freedom of religion or belief.

In 2020 there were regular reports of house-churches being raided. Security



raids on house-churches took place in cities of Kerman, Karaj, Tehran, Malayer, Gonbad, Khark, Rask, and Arak, though the majority were not publicly reported.

Cultural heritage and property associated with Christian communities also continued to be under threat of confiscation or demolition.

CONFISCATION, DAMAGE, DEMOLITION AND REPURPOSING OF PROPERTY



CHURCHES

(Churches that held services for Persian-speaking Christians remained closed to Persian congregants in 2020.)



RETREAT CENTRES

(The Assemblies of God retreat centre in Karaj, the Garden of Sharon, remained closed following a confiscation order)



CHRISTIAN CEMETERIES AND BURIAL PLACES

(Some sites faced damage, demolition, and suspected arson)



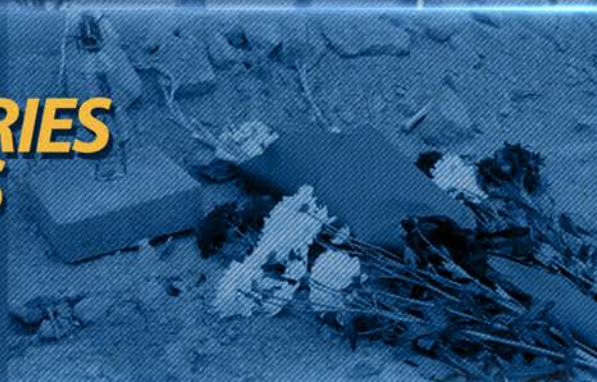
HOSPITALS

"*Messiah*" Hospital, founded nearly a century ago in Kermanshah by Presbyterian missionaries, was also threatened with demolition.)



BISHOP'S HOUSE

(The repurposing of the bishop's house in Isfahan, once the seat of the Anglican Church in Iran, now reopened as an office for an organisation directly ruled by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei.)



VIOLATIONS AND INCIDENTS

CHURCH CLOSURES AND VIOLATIONS OF PROPERTY RIGHTS

Churches which used to hold services for Persian-speaking Christians remained closed to them in 2020, including Tehran's St. Peter's Presbyterian Church, Emmanuel Presbyterian Church, and Assemblies of God Central Church, 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 Sharon, remained closed following a confiscation order in March 2018. Following international and national condemnation of the attempt to close and confiscate the Assyrian Presbyterian Church in Tabriz in May 2019, the keys were eventually returned to the church authorities and in 2020 the congregation of ethnic Armenians and Assyrians were able to continue worshipping in the church building, church building, though converts cannot attend.

Meanwhile, on **17 May**, Manoto News broadcast footage of smoke billowing over the walls of a Christian cemetery in Eslamshahr, south of Tehran. Fires had been reported in other sites belonging to religious minorities in the preceding days. On **15 May**, the anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel, the tomb of Biblical figures Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai in Hamedan was set alight. Then, on **16 May**, Iran International posted video footage of the aftermath of a fire inside a Hindu temple in Bandar Abbas. The governor of Eslamshahr blamed the cemetery fire on a guard burning grass; the Hindu



temple fire was blamed on religious artefacts catching alight; but Esther and Mordecai's tomb was reported by a local journalist as deliberate arson. While there was no evidence of any state involvement and the timing may have been coincidental, Iran has been condemned for directing a campaign of hate speech against religious minorities and thereby inciting attacks and later failing to stand up against the perpetrators.

In **June** the daughter of Rev Hossein Soodmand, an Iranian Christian pastor executed for "apostasy" in 1990, called on the Iranian authorities to return his burial place to his family after it was found to have been demolished when the family paid a visit to mark the anniversary of his death in December 2019.

Masih ("Messiah") Hospital, founded nearly a century ago in Kermanshah by Presbyterian missionaries, was also threatened with demolition. However, in August, it was reported that the now-defunct hospital had regained its nationally registered status and was therefore protected from potential demolition.

On **18 September**, it was reported that the repurposing of the bishop's house in Isfahan, once the seat of the Anglican Church in Iran, had been completed, 41 years after its confiscation in November 1979. The Mostazafan Foundation, an organisation directly ruled by the Supreme Leader and which purportedly works to support the poor, had restored the building and reopened it as an office to



manage its many other properties. The completed expropriation received public attention during Muharram, the Shia month of mourning, when a banner was erected in front of the house, declaring it "a house of mourning for Hussein", the murdered

grandson of Muhammad, and sporting photographs of both former Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini and his successor, Ali Khamenei.

On **31 October**, the 70-year-old Adventist church in central Tehran was demolished, along with the giant concrete cross on its facade. The church had been out of use for several years and in 2015 was completely gutted, including the destruction of two engravings of the Ten Commandments, which stood either side of the pulpit. The new owner had since been seeking to redevelop the site, but the national heritage organisation issued an order that special permission must be sought before the symbolic cross could be removed. The demolition finally went ahead after the local mayor's office granted permission.

On **1 November**, it was reported that the old Armenian Christian cemetery in Qazvin had been razed and converted into a park.



ARRESTS AND SENTENCING

The following cases have all been publicly reported, but it should be noted that there are many more cases that go unreported, either because no-one raises awareness – arresting authorities frequently issue threats to prevent publicity - or because those involved have requested confidentiality.

On **11 January**, 65-year-old Christian convert Ismaeil Maghrebinejad was sentenced to three years in prison for “insulting Islamic sacred beliefs in the cyberspace”, because he had reacted with a smiley-face emoji to a message sent to his phone, which poked fun at the ruling Iranian clerics. After another court hearing on **27 February**, Ismaeil was sentenced to an additional two years in prison for “membership of a group hostile to the regime” - Ismaeil is an Anglican Church member. After a retrial on **9 May**, Ismaeil was reconvicted of the charge and sentenced to an extra year in prison for “propaganda against the state”. The first of these three sentences was overturned on appeal on **5 July**. But on **16 July**, Ismaeil was informed his appeals against the other two sentences had failed.

On **12 January**, Christian convert Mary Mohammadi was arrested as she took part in protests following Iran’s admission of guilt in the downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane. Mary was held incommunicado for a month, and concerns grew for her safety until she was eventually discovered to be in the notorious Qarchak women’s prison south of Tehran. Mary later revealed she was beaten, twice strip-searched, denied food, and forced to sit outside in the cold for hours. She was released on bail on **26 February**, then on **21 April** given a suspended sentence of three months and one day in prison, plus 10 lashes. During the court hearing, the judge questioned her about her religious views, even though the charges were unrelated to her faith.





On **24 February**, the long-drawn-out appeal hearings of five Christians, including Iranian-Assyrian pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz and his wife Shamiram Issavi, were postponed again because the summons for one of the three Christian converts charged alongside them had not been sent. Since the sentencing of Pastor Victor and the three converts - Hadi Asgari, Kavian Fallah-Mohammadi, and Amin Afshar-Naderi - in July 2017 and of Shamiram in January 2018, multiple hearings had been scheduled only to be postponed, with a wide range of excuses. Another hearing was postponed on 1 **June**, this time without excuse. Finally, on **19 July**, Victor received a telephone call from his lawyer, informing him that his appeal had been rejected and that no further hearing would take place. Then, on **11 August**, Shamiram was summoned to Evin Prison to begin her sentence, and told she had until **16 August** to turn herself in. Victor and Shamiram fled the country the night before, and the other three converts are also now outside Iran. They too have been told their appeals failed.

After a hearing on **25 February**, nine Christian converts from the northern city of Rasht - Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad, Shahrooz Eslamdoust, Behnam Akhlaghi, Babak Hosseinzadeh, Mehdi Khatibi, Khalil Dehghanpour, Hossein Kadivar, Kamal Naamanian and Mohammad Vafadar - were told their appeals had failed against five-year sentences issued to them in October 2019 for “acting against national security” by being members of a house-church. None of the men, nor their lawyers, were permitted to attend the hearing.

On **11 March**, Christian convert Ebrahim Firouzi's two-year sentence of internal exile was extended by 11 months because he had not received permission before travelling home to sort out some family affairs related to the death of his mother during his six years in prison. He had not been able to attend to these matters during a two-week period between leaving prison and journeying into exile 1,000 miles from home. Ebrahim called the decision to extend his exile the latest "miscarriage of justice" in his case. On **27 September**, Ebrahim was summoned to face fresh charges of "insulting the sacred" and "propaganda against the state through promoting the Christian faith", but the local prosecutor dismissed the charges, brought by intelligence agents, after listening to Ebrahim for just 10 minutes.

On **14 May**, four Christian converts from Rasht - Hadi (Moslem) Rahimi, Sakine (Mehri) Behjati, Ramin Hassanpour and his wife Saeede (Kathrin) Sajadpour - were detained following their court hearing, having been unable to afford the bail set for them. They were released a week later on reduced bail equating to around \$13,000 each. On **1 August**, Ramin was given a five-year sentence, Moslem four years, and Mehri and Kathrin two years for "acting against national security" by

belonging to a house-church and "spreading 'Zionist' Christianity".



Ramin Hassanpour and his wife Kathrin Sajadpour, sentenced to 5 and 4 years in prison respectively.

On **16 June**, Christian converts Mehdi Akbari, Fatemeh Sharifi, Mehdi Roohparvar and Simin Soheilinia were charged with "acting against national security" and "forming an illegal evangelical Christian group", under Article 498 of the Islamic Penal Code, at Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran. They were also reportedly accused of "widespread association with missionary groups, as well as evangelical Christian groups outside the country – in Russia, Georgia, Turkey, and Armenia". Judge Mohammad Moghiseh reportedly spoke "obscenely" to them and would not listen to their defence, only citing the report of the intelligence agent. The women were then released on dramatically increased

bail of 7 billion tomans (\$375,000), but the men remained detained, and their sentences were communicated to them in prison on **17 October**: Mehdi A, Simin and Fatemeh were sentenced to 10 years in prison, and Mehdi R to five years.

On **21 June**, seven Christian converts in the south-western city of Bushehr were given sentences ranging from prison and exile to work restrictions and fines. Habib Heydari and brothers Sam and Sasan Khosravi were given one-year prison sentences, and Pooriya Peyma 91 days. Sam and Sasan were also sentenced to two years' internal exile, including a ban on working in their specialist profession: the hospitality sector. Fatemeh Talebi and sisters Maryam and Marjan Falahi were fined the equivalent of between \$200-\$400. Maryam, a nurse, was also given a lifetime ban on working for any national institution, including the hospita she had worked at for 20 years.

On **22 June**, it was reported that three Christian converts serving 10-year sentences in Evin Prison had had their sentences reduced at a retrial. Yousef Nadarkhani and Zaman (Saheb) Fadaie's sentences were reduced to six years, and Mohammad Reza (Youhan) Omid's to two years. However, fellow Christian prisoner Nasser Navard Gol-Tapeh was told a retrial

in his case would not take place. On **3 November** Nasser received written confirmation that a third appeal for a retrial had been rejected.

On **30 June** and **1 July**, it was reported that at least 12 Christians had been arrested by intelligence agents belonging to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps in a coordinated operation across three cities: Tehran, Karaj, and Malayer. In the following weeks, the number of Christians confirmed either to have been arrested or interrogated grew to 35, with at least 17 arrested. Most were released after a few days, either without charge or on bail after being charged with "acting against national security by promoting 'Zionist' Christianity". But Iranian-Armenian pastor Joseph Shahbazian, 56, and four Christian converts - Farhad Khazaei, Salar Eshraghi



Joseph Shahbazian, arrested in June 2020

Moghadam, Mina Khajavi, and Malihe Nazari - were held for longer. Farhad, Salar and Mina were released a few weeks later on bail equivalent to between \$40,000-\$60,000. But the families of Malihe and Joseph were told they must pay the equivalent of \$150,000 for bail. Joseph, whose family were only able to see him after seven weeks' detention and whose place of detention remained unknown even

then, was finally released on **22 August** on slightly reduced bail equating to around \$100,000. And Malihe was released on **5 September**, also on reduced bail.



Mother and daughter Masoumeh and Sonya Ghasemi were among those arrested in the raids.

On **19 July**, a judge ruled that Sam Khosravi and Maryam Falahi were “not fit” to be the parents of their adopted daughter, Lydia, because they are Christian converts, and Lydia is considered Muslim. On **22 September**, an appeals court upheld the verdict.

On **25 July**, Christian convert Aziz (Andreas) Majidzadeh and another unnamed convert were sentenced to four and six years in prison, respectively, for “acting against national security” through organisation and membership of house-churches. They were also sentenced to three months' community service in an old people's home, a two-year travel ban, and a two-year ban on membership of any political or social group - all of which would come into force at the conclusion of their prison terms. However, on **9 November**, an appeal court surprisingly overturned the verdict, citing their statements during interrogation that they had never acted against national security and had only met with other Christians to worship and pray. This ruling was in stark contrast to numerous other verdicts - including the initial one in this case - highlighting the arbitrary and subjective nature of Iran's revolutionary courts.

On **11 November**, coordinated 9am raids by intelligence agents targeted 12 homes of Christians in Fardis, west of Tehran. None of the Christians, who have not yet been named, were arrested, but many of their personal belongings were confiscated – including phones, laptops, Bibles, Christian literature and anything else to do with Christianity – and they can all expect to be summoned for interrogation.

IMPRISONED CHRISTIANS

According to public sources, at least 15 Iranian Christians were still in prison at the end of 2020 (and at least four other Christians are in prison but their cases have not been reported) on charges related to their Christian faith, having either started sentences in 2020 or continued to serve sentences issued in previous years. Of those presently detained, 13 are from Rasht, but are imprisoned in Tehran, making family visits more difficult - despite the law mandating that prisoners should be detained as near to home as possible. A handful of Christians returned home after completing jail sentences in 2020, while many others are on temporary release from bail and/or in the process of appealing sentences. There are also two Christians now serving exile sentences, while another remains in prison on a disputed criminal charge.

On **7 January**, Ramiel Bet-Tamraz, son of Pastor Victor, began his four-month sentence for “actions against national security”, related to his membership of the house-church led by his parents. Ramiel was released on **26 February**, as one of thousands of prisoners on short-term sentences released at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic.



In **January**, Christian convert Majidreza Souzanchi was moved from Evin Prison to Greater Tehran Prison, upon the completion of his two-year sentence for membership of a house-church. He is now serving a separate two-year sentence for theft, a charge he has repeatedly denied. He was also sentenced to 74 lashes.



On **2 February** Christian convert Asghar Salehi was released after serving two months of his six-month sentence. On **8 February** fellow converts Mohammad Reza Rezaei and a third named only as “A.T.” were also released early, on the proviso they partake in no further Christian activity. They had been given the sentences in September 2019 for “propaganda against the system through promoting ‘Zionist’ Christianity”.

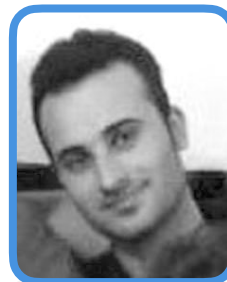


On **2 March**, Christian converts Rokhsareh (Mahrokh) Ghanbari, 62, and Amin Khaki were given 36 days' leave from prison due to the coronavirus outbreak. When Mahrokh returned to prison on **2**



April, she was told she did not have to complete the remaining four months of her one-year sentence. On **6 April** Amin was also told he wouldn't need to serve the remaining six months of his 14-month sentence. On **15 March**, Christian convert Fatemeh (Aylar) Bakhtari was also given a furlough from prison. Her leave was later extended and then, on Easter Day, **12 April**, when Aylar called the prison for an update, she was told she did not need to serve the remaining five months of her one-year sentence.

On **1 June**, Christian converts Khalil Dehghanpour, Hossein Kadivar, Kamal Naamanian and Mohammad Vafadar began serving their five-year sentences. They went to prison a day ahead of their summons deadline to request additional time with their families but were instead detained and told their sentences would begin immediately. Fellow converts Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad, Shahrooz Eslamdoust, Behnam Akhlaghi, Babak Hosseinzadeh and Mehdi Khatibi have been detained since July 2019, when they were unable to afford the high bail demand (equivalent to \$130,000 each) issued to them after insisting on their own choice of lawyer.



On **18 August**, Christian convert Youhan Omid was released from prison after his 10-year sentence was reduced to two years at a retrial. But just four weeks later, on **14 September**, he began two years' internal exile in the southwestern city of Borazjan, more than 1,000km from his home in Rasht. Then, on **14 October**, he was flogged 80 times for drinking wine as part of Communion. He had been convicted of that "offence" in 2016. Youhan's friend Saheb Fadaie, who was convicted alongside him, received his 80 lashes on **15 November**.



On **2 November**, it was reported that Saheb had returned to prison after a five-day furlough - his first in two years' imprisonment, despite appealing for compassionate leave at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, when his case was subject to a retrial, and later when he began to experience symptoms of the virus. Saheb was previously denied medical treatment, in December 2019, despite suffering a constant fever for over a week, and hallucinating.



On **17 November**, it was confirmed that Christian converts Mehdi Akbari and Mehdi Roohparvar were being held in Ward 4 of Evin Prison and had been there since their trial in June. It was later reported that fellow converts Fatemeh Sharifi and Simin Soheilini, who were given 10-year sentences alongside them, had also been detained in Evin but over the summer were released on dramatically increased bail of 7 billion tomans (\$375,000).



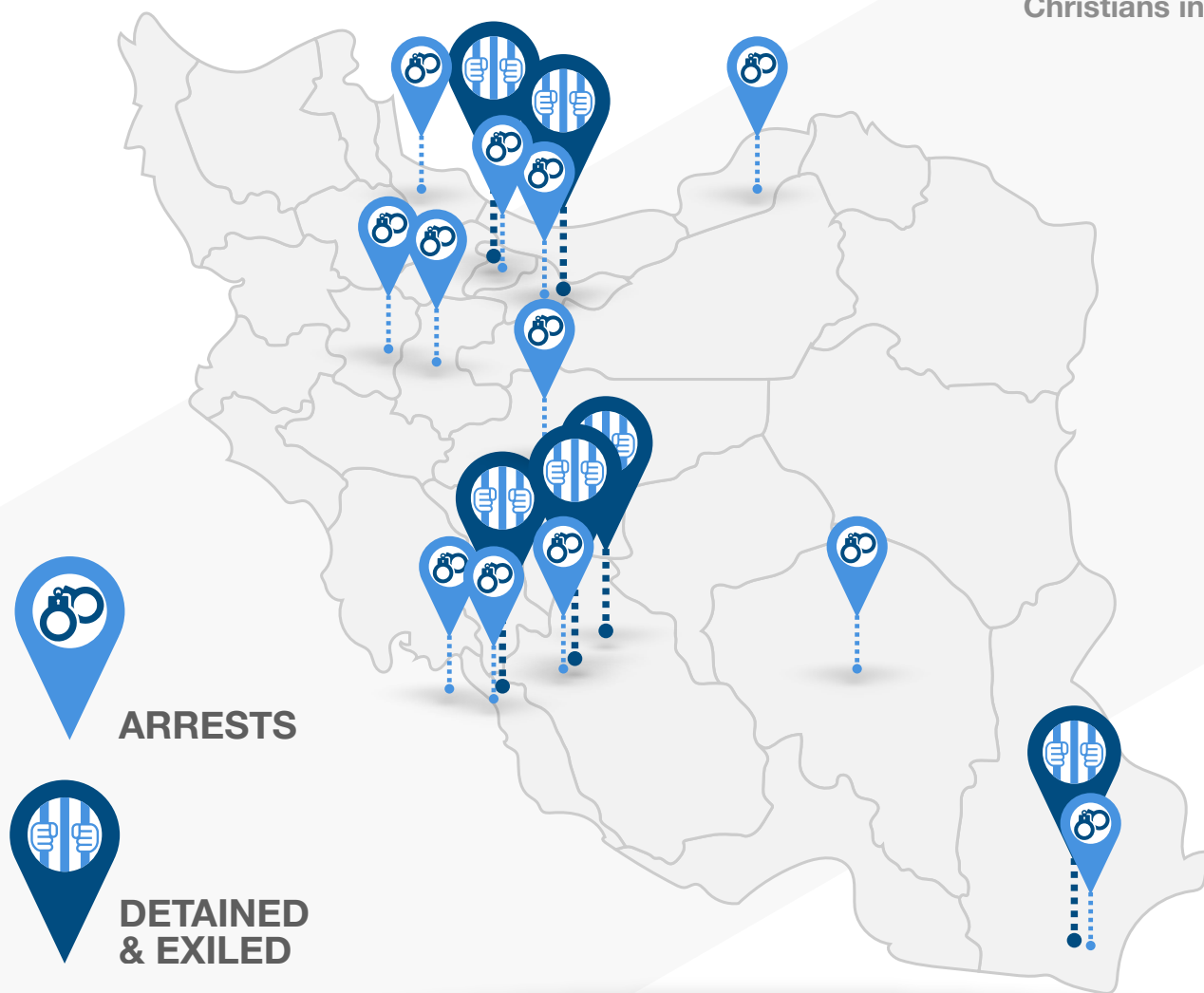
Meanwhile, Yousef Nadarkhani and Nasser Navard Gol-Tapeh remained in prison throughout 2020, despite calls for their at least temporary release on account of the pandemic, especially due to Nasser's age - he's 59 years old - and because Yousef's case was subject to a retrial.



TABLE OF PRISONERS

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 | Location | Detention began | Released | Sentence |
|--|--|-----------------|------------|--|
| Ebrahim Firouzi | Rajaie Shahr Prison (Karaj) / Rask (exile) | 2013 | Oct. 2019 | 6 years / 2 years 11 months' exile |
| Majidreza Souzanchi | Evin Prison (Tehran) / Greater Tehran Prison | 2017 | - | 5 years (reduced to 2) / 2 years (criminal charge) |
| Nasser Navard Gol-Tapeh | Evin Prison | Jan 2018 | - | 10 years |
| Yousef Nadarkhani | Evin Prison | July 2018 | - | 10 years (reduced to 6) / 2 years' exile |
| Mohammad Ali (Yasser) Mossayebzadeh | Evin Prison | July 2018 | - | 10 years / 80 lashes |
| Zaman (Saheb) Fadaie | Evin Prison | July 2018 | - | 10 years (reduced to 6) / 2 years' exile / 80 lashes |
| Mohammad Reza (Youhan) Omid | Evin Prison / Borazjan (exile) | July 2018 | Aug. 2020 | 10 years (reduced to 2) / 2 years' exile / 80 lashes |
| Amin Khaki | Central Prison of Karaj | July 2019 | March 2020 | 14 months |
| Fatemeh Bakhtari | Evin Prison | Aug. 2019 | March 2020 | 1 year |
| Rokhsareh (Mahrokh) Ghanbari | Shahid Kachooei Prison (Karaj) | Oct. 2019 | March 2020 | 1 year |
| Abdolreza Ali (Matthias) Haghejad | Evin Prison | July 2019 | - | 5 years |
| Mohammad (Shahrooz) Eslamdoust | Evin Prison / Greater Tehran Prison | July 2019 | - | 5 years |
| Babak Hosseinzadeh | Evin Prison | July 2019 | - | 5 years |
| Mehdi Khatibi | Evin Prison | July 2019 | - | 5 years |



| Name | Location | Detention began | Released | Sentence |
|----------------------------|---------------|-----------------|----------|----------|
| Behnam Akhlaghi | Evin Prison | July 2019 | - | 5 years |
| Asghar Salehi | Eghlid Prison | Dec. 2019 | Feb 2020 | 6 months |
| Mohammadreza Rezaei | Eghlid Prison | Dec. 2019 | Feb 2020 | 6 months |
| T. | Eghlid Prison | Dec. 2019 | Feb 2020 | 6 months |
| Ramiel Bet-Tamraz | Evin Prison | Jan 2020 | Feb 2020 | 4 months |
| Hossein Kadivar | Evin Prison | June 2020 | - | 5 years |
| Khalil Dehghanpour | Evin Prison | June 2020 | - | 5 years |
| Kamal Naamanian | Evin Prison | June 2020 | - | 5 years |
| Mohammad Vafadar | Evin Prison | June 2020 | - | 5 years |
| Mehdi Akbari | Evin Prison | June 2020 | - | 10 years |
| Mehdi Roohparvar | Evin Prison | June 2020 | - | 5 years |

CASE STUDY

PASTOR VICTOR BET-TAMRAZ AND HIS HOUSE-CHURCH



Victor Bet-Tamraz was an ordained minister with the legally recognised Assyrian Pentecostal Church for almost 35 years before his Tehran church was forcibly closed in 2009 over his refusal to stop Persian-language services and ban Muslim-born Iranians from attending. The church was later reopened - with the new impositions in place - but Victor had been removed from its leadership.

And it was here that his journey with Iran's underground Church began, as Victor, deprived of a church in which to minister, began holding services in his home. In keeping with his previous practice, the services were open to all without distinction.

Among those to join Victor's new house-church were Christian converts Amin Afshar-Naderi, Kavian-Fallah Mohammadi and Hadi Asgari, who had all been part of the church congregation and were glad to still have the opportunity to learn about their new faith under Victor's leadership, albeit with less freedom.

As Kavian later explained, *“The only place Persian-speaking Christians can gather is in homes, so inevitably we do gather together like this, but of course it wouldn't be our first choice, and it isn't safe.”*

On 26 December 2014, as Victor and a number of converts including Amin and Kavian met together to celebrate Christmas, over a dozen intelligence agents stormed in and arrested Victor, Amin and Kavian.

Victor was held for 65 days in solitary confinement, though the Iranian state media later claimed he hadn't even seen the colour of the prison walls. *“Indeed, I didn't see the colour of the prison - they are right - because I always had to wear a blindfold over my eyes!”* Victor explained.

Victor, Amin and Kavian, as well as Hadi, were later sentenced, in July 2017, to 10 years in prison for alleged “actions against national security” in relation to their house-church membership.

Reflecting on the sentence, Victor said: *“It hurt to know you haven't committed any crime, nor made any particular mistake, and that your only crime is that you love Christ and worship God, and that this is a crime for Christians in Iran.”*

Kavian said he was “surprised” when he was arrested, *“without any previous warning and I didn't know for what reason”.*

“It's unbelievable that a person [would] be charged with a heavy charge such as acting against national security just for attending the church, and then be sentenced to 10 years in prison!” he said.

The following January, Victor's wife Shamiram received two five-year prison sentences of her own - also on charges of “acting against national security” as a result of her role in the house-church. But it wasn't for another two and a half years, until July 2020, when the five Christians' prison sentences were finally upheld by an appeal court.



“It was a very difficult time, all this waiting,” Victor explained. “There were usually three or four appeal hearings scheduled each year, and when they announced the date – two months before each hearing – your worrying started and you no longer had peace of mind, because you didn’t know what would happen.

“There is a saying in Persian: ‘It’s a game for a cat, but death for the mouse.’ You experience this death several times during each year – at least three or four times – so in three years, if you add it up, we experienced this 12 times!”

Victor and Shamiram fled Iran on 15 August 2020, one day before Shamiram was due to begin her sentence.

“I didn’t want to leave Iran at all,” Victor said. “If they gave me two years, three years in prison, I would have endured it. But they issued the verdict very late, and I am almost 66 years old now. You can imagine, if I would go to prison now, I would go in alive, but most likely I wouldn’t come out alive.”

Amin, Kavian and Hadi had already fled the country, and were also later informed their sentences had been upheld.

“Leaving Iran was the hardest journey I’ve ever made,” Victor said. “You can’t easily leave your homeland, where you grew up. Your homeland is where you belong. My ‘belongings’ weren’t a house, a car, or the streets. My ‘belongings’ were the people I served for 45 years all over the country. It was love, it was affection, it was hope, it was life; it was sitting at each other’s tables.

“Being separated from these dear people is extremely difficult. I think every Iranian who has had these experiences knows what pain it causes in the hearts of human beings. It was the hardest decision of my life, and one I was forced to take.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has an obligation under national and 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.
- » 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, including converts from other religions, thereby amending Article 13 of the constitution to recognise fully the freedom of religion or belief of all faiths as envisaged by Article 18 of the ICCPR, to which Iran is a State Party, without reservation, and therefore legally bound to respect.
- » For the government of Iran to:
 - » Re-establish ownership of churches, properties and material confiscated from Christians and other religious minorities under security-related charges.
 - » Cease to use provisions such as Articles 498, 499, 500 and 513 of the Penal Code and Article 167 of the Iranian constitution to unjustly detain minority-faith adherents.
 - » Guarantee the right to counsel to all individuals charged with security-related crimes and to select a lawyer of their choice, therefore repealing the Note to Article 48 of Iran's Criminal Procedures Regulations.
 - » Grant access to the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran to allow him to thoroughly investigate Iran's compliance with international law on human rights.



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 its citizens by highlighting this principle during political and/or economic discussions with, or concerning, Iran.



We thank the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, Javaid Rehman, and UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, for raising issues faced by religious minorities, including Christians, and ask them to continue in this endeavour.

APPENDIX

OTHER REPORTS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM VIOLATIONS IN IRAN

- **Amnesty International** - [Iran 2019](#)
- **Human Rights Watch World** - [HRW Report 2020](#)
- **UK Home Office**: Country Policy and Information Note Iran: [Christians and Christian converts \(February 2020\)](#)
- **UN Human Rights Council**: [Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran \(January 2020\)](#)
- **US Department of State**: [2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Iran](#)
- **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)** - [2020 Report Iran Chapter](#)



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