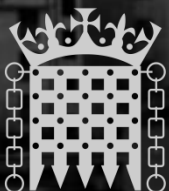




**FREEDOM
DECLARED**

The Christians in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group
and the All Party Parliamentary Group for International
Freedom of Religion or Belief joint report on

The Persecution of Christians in Iran



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1. Letter from the Co-chairs

It has been a privilege to co-chair this fresh Inquiry into the Persecution of Christians in Iran. It is a subject that weighs heavily on our hearts, particularly following our initial Inquiry, where MPs visited the Middle East in 2012 to meet personally with Iranians who had endured severe maltreatment in their homeland because of their faith.

It was with cautious optimism that we watched Hassan Rouhani become President of Iran in August 2013. We joined with many Iranians in hoping that his influence would soften Iran's harsh policies toward the nation's religious and ethnic minorities. Sadly, we have been disappointed that his positive promises and moderate language have not translated into any meaningful improvement. The persecution remains as severe today as it was in 2012, when the Christians in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) produced its first report on the Persecution of Christians in Iran.

For over a year the APPG pursued the goal of a diplomatic trip to Tehran, in order to open positive and respectful dialogue with the Iranian authorities on matters relating to freedom of religion or belief. When it finally became clear that the Iranian government had no intention of allowing the APPG to visit Tehran, the decision was made to renew the Inquiry into the Persecution of Christians.

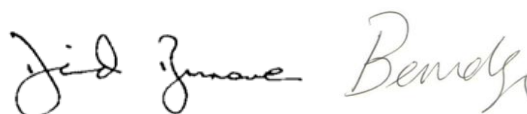
For this renewed Inquiry, the Christians in Parliament APPG has joined with the APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, whose work to ensure that religious freedom is a firm priority for the UK Parliament and Government is highly strategic and greatly valued.

On behalf of the panel, we express profound thanks to all those who gave

evidence to the Inquiry. All the panellists were struck by the dignity and courage of the Iranian Christians who testified. We also thank Sadeq Saba, Editor of BBC Persian, Ajay Sharma of the Foreign Office, and Sohrab Ahmari of the *Wall Street Journal*, who gave up their time to contribute to the Inquiry. We would also like to express our appreciation to those who submitted expert reports: Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), Elam Ministries, Open Doors, Middle East Concern (MEC), and Dr Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran.

It has been a pleasure to work alongside colleagues from across the political spectrum, some of whom were involved in the original Inquiry, and others of whom have joined us for the renewed Inquiry. Our thanks go to Fiona Bruce MP, Sarah Newton MP, the Rt Hon David Jones MP, Jeremy Lefroy MP, Lord Hylton, Lord Selkirk, Lord Farmer, Lord Alton, and the Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith, Bishop of St Albans.

In cataloguing the abuse of Christians during Rouhani's presidency, we hope to draw attention to the lack of freedom of religion in Iran, and encourage the government to prioritise this issue in all dialogues with the Islamic Republic. Many of the recommendations of this report apply to Iran's other suffering religious minorities, such as the Bahá'ís, Sufi Dervishes and Sunni Muslims. We hope, pray and labour for a day when Iranians of all faiths or none can live in their homeland without fear of persecution or harassment, with the full spectrum of their rights protected.



David Burrowes MP and
Baroness Berridge of the Vale of Catmose

2. Executive summary

The joint-APPG Inquiry into the persecution of Christians in Iran held two oral evidence sessions (hereafter called 'Westminster hearings') in December 2014, and took testimony from thirteen witnesses. Some witnesses gave their statements via video, while others were interviewed in person by the panel. The Inquiry also received statements from NGOs and experts that work in this field. The Inquiry heard that the persecution of Christians in Iran has not diminished since Hassan Rouhani took the presidential office, despite his pre-election promises of greater respect for human rights.

Christians continue to be arbitrarily arrested and interrogated because of their faith-related activities. They continue to be treated harshly, with some facing severe physical and psychological torture during periods of detention. The judiciary continues to construe legitimate Christian activities (such as meeting in private homes for prayer meeting and bible studies, or being in contact with Christians outside of Iran) as political activities that threaten the national security of Iran. Therefore Christians continue to be issued long prison sentences and/or corporal punishment. Churches continue to be pressured into ceasing all services or activities in the national language of Persian (Farsi), or are closed down. Property belonging to Christians has continued to be seized, and Christians continue to face discrimination in the workplace and in educational institutions.

There has been no substantive change in Iran's human rights record since the election of President Rouhani; in fact by some indicators you could argue that things have gotten worse.

Ajay Sharma, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

3. Introduction: Rouhani's broken promises

During his election campaign, Hassan Rouhani made a number of promises regarding religious freedom in Iran. He is quoted as saying on 11 April 2013, "All Iranian people should feel there is justice. Justice means equal opportunity. All ethnicities, all religions, even religious minorities, must feel justice."¹

In an August 2013 interview, cited by Press TV, President Rouhani was quoted as stating that his administration would guarantee equal rights for all Iranians, and that "no authority should differentiate between various ethnicities, religions, minorities and followers of different faiths."²

The Draft Citizen's Rights Charter, which was revealed early in Rouhani's presidency in November 2013, states that "holding and attending religious rituals of the religions identified in the Constitution (Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism) is permitted."³ The draft Charter was widely seen as a major step by Rouhani's administration to improve the situation of human rights in Iran.

However, Rouhani's early promises have not been implemented: throughout the first 18 months of his term, there has been continuing systemic persecution and discrimination against Christians and other religious minorities in Iran. Among Christians, the worst forms of persecution continue to be reserved for those who have converted to Christianity from a Muslim background (who tend to gather in informal house churches), and for those

¹ <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/08/rouhanis->

² <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/08/19/319474/extremism-harmful-to-nation-rouhani/>

³ <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2014/01/draft-citizenship/>

who minister among Muslim-background believers.

The Inquiry heard that the Islamic Republic of Iran is becoming less, rather than more, tolerant of dissenting voices.

One man was arrested because, as far as the authorities were concerned, his social media activities went too far in questioning some of the tenets of Islam and now he has been sentenced to death. This is a dangerous trend. I hear from some people that the reason the regime is taking such a tough line against people like him is because a lot of people are becoming disappointed with Islam as a religion because of what the regime is doing. People are converting to Christianity or other religions - this is becoming very dangerous for the regime. The harsh sentences are a way of controlling the situation.

Sadeq Saba, Editor BBC Persian, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

Witnesses were generally in agreement that even if President Rouhani should want to improve religious freedom and other human rights in Iran, he does not have the authority to do so.

Before Mostafa's appeal hearing, we thought maybe because of Rouhani, something would change. But [our lawyer] said, 'No: prison, Christianity, Sufis, Bahá'ís, is in the security system's hands; not in Rouhani's hands. He doesn't have any power.' We can see it now: in many cities we heard they tortured- physically- our sisters and brothers. Nothing has changed.

Gilda Bordbar, video testimony, filmed 27 November 2014

International NGO *Open Doors*⁴ has ranked the Islamic Republic of Iran at number 7 on its *World Watch List 2015*. This list ranks nations according to the level of pressure and persecution that Christian communities face in that nation, with the worst global situation ranked at number 1. According to the assessment of the *World Watch List*, the situation of Christians has deteriorated in the past year in Iran, which was previously ranked at number 9 in the *World Watch List 2014*. The given reason for this change in ranking is that "more Christians were sentenced to prison and pressure on those detained increased [in the reporting period - 2014]"⁵.

The number of Christians believed to be detained in prison at the end of December 2014 was estimated at 92.⁶ During 2014, over 110 individual Christians spent time behind bars.⁷ These figures could be far lower than the real number of detainees, because many cases are kept confidential due to security concerns.

I had a slight hope that with Rouhani there would be more freedom... So I gave him a vote. But no laws have been changed. There is no increase in freedom for Christians.

Elham, video testimony, filmed 26 November 20

The main body of this report documents the various forms of persecution and discrimination that Christians currently face in Iran.

⁴ www.opendoors.org

⁵ Open Doors, *Persecution Dynamics - Iran*

⁶ This estimate is shared by Middle East Concern (MEC), Article 18 and the American Centre for Law and Justice (ACLJ) and was calculated through the sharing of latest information between these organisations and others.

⁷ This figure comprises Christians who were known to be serving judicial sentences during 2014, and also Christians who were known to be detained pre-trial, either for days, weeks or months. Figure provided by Elam Ministries.

4. Evidence of persecution and discrimination

4.1. Background

The panel gathered evidence of continued widespread and targeted persecution of Christians in Iran under Rouhani. The most severe abuse is faced by Christians who have converted from a Muslim background, and those who engage in ministry among Persian-speaking people of a Muslim background. However, restrictions and discrimination are faced by all Christians.

For every person who chooses to become a Christian in Iran, you live with the knowledge that the government is against you. And that's the story that has continued to play out under Rouhani.

David Yeghnazar, Elam Ministries, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

4.2. Hostile rhetoric

Hostile and negative rhetoric toward Iran's Christian community and other minorities has continued to be espoused by government figures and clerics during Rouhani's presidency.

Iran's non-tolerance of conversion from Islam (apostasy) was articulated publicly in October 2014 by Ali Younesi, Rouhani's senior advisor on Ethnic and Religious Minority Affairs. During an interview with the conservative news agency, *Fars*, Younesi declared that "Converting to different sects is illegal in our country" and also that evangelism is illegal for minority faith groups. It has long been known that Iran does not tolerate conversion to minority faiths, nor evangelism, but this interview is the most recent, direct and public affirmation of these policies from a senior figure.

We feel very strongly that this kind of language needs to be made known around the world. They say there is religious freedom, but clearly religious freedom is not there.

David Yeghnazar, Elam Ministries, Westminster hearing 2 December 2014

4.3. Monitoring and harassment

Christian converts in Iran - and any Christians who minister among individuals from a Muslim background - know they are either already being monitored by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), or that MOIS may identify them and begin monitoring at any time.

If you talk to anyone, they are very careful about phones. They know they can't send emails or Skype... they have to be very careful about where they meet, how they meet... everyone says the same story. The constant theme is pressure.

David Yeghnazar, Elam Ministries, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

The Inquiry heard that following release from detention or imprisonment, Christians often continue to be monitored and harassed:

The first year [following my release from Evin prison] was so hard because we could see police around our home, and we could hear they were listening to our telephone. The first year was very hard. I think that they really wanted to show us that they are still checking us. Many times when we were going out, we could see they were near to our house.

Sara Akhavan Fard, Westminster hearing, 16 December 2014

Often the MOIS particularly target Christian leaders, but family members of the individual can also find themselves targeted for harassment. For example, threats were faced for many years by a

Christian internet pastor called Farhad⁸, according to Elam Ministries. Farhad had learnt that the MOIS knew about his involvement in the distribution of Christian scriptures and books, which would provoke a harsh punishment. After a Christian friend of his was arrested and interrogated, Farhad feared he too would soon be arrested, and he decided to leave Iran. Following Farhad's departure, Farhad's elderly mother, and his sister and brother-in-law have continued to face threats on an almost daily basis. They have also had to relocate to another city because agents of MOIS informed the local community that they are 'apostates' from Islam.

Church members are also often subject to harassment following the arrest of their leader.

Sometimes they call [our church members]... they want them to go to their office, and they threaten them. They ask some questions, but illegally- informally.

Mostafa Bordbar, video testimony, filmed 27 November 2014

It is not only the house church Christians that face monitoring, but also religious institutions. Most of the remaining registered churches have government security cameras installed outside of them. Although these institutions are registered and recognised by the government, religious minorities continue to be viewed with suspicion.

Armenian and Jewish churches and synagogues respectively are under intense government surveillance.

Sohrab Ahmari, Wall Street Journal, Westminster hearing, 16 December 2014

4.4. Closure of, and pressure on, churches

Since the 1979 Revolution, the government has not granted a licence for the establishment of a new church organisation or allowed the construction of any church building, Orthodox, Protestant, or other. It has required recognised churches to limit attendance to those who are not from a Muslim background, and to conduct services only in the minority languages of Assyrian or Armenian. Churches have also been closed down, and had leaders arrested, if they refused to comply with these restrictions.

During Ahmadinejad's government, they closed many formal churches in Iran, and we had to go to home churches. And they told us- especially Ayatollah Khamenei said very officially - that home churches are against the law, and you should not go to home churches, just the official churches. And they closed the official churches - so what should we do?

Mostafa Bordbar, video testimony, filmed 27 November 2014.

The Inquiry heard that the authorities have continued to put pressure on registered churches during Rouhani's presidency.

Since Rouhani got to power, at least two official Protestant churches in Tehran have been banned to hold any religious services in the Persian language.

Morad Mokhtari, Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre, quoted in Open Doors' submission to the Inquiry

An increasing number of churches were closed and their leaders arrested. The government intensified its campaign to remove Farsi-speaking Christians from the country... Severe surveillance on house-churches leads to increasing fear among those attending.

Open Doors' submission to the Inquiry

⁸ Pseudonym

4.5. House raids

Witnesses testified that raids on private homes of Christians, and subsequent arrests and detentions, are widespread in Iran. These raids are most often reported to have been orchestrated by agents of MOIS, and can sometimes involve violence. In one house raid of July 2014, a 12 year old boy endured physical abuse.

They gathered everything, including the computer. Before they gathered the things they took me to a room. One of them asked me, 'Where are the books that your family has been giving out?' They asked me if I was a Christian. I said I was, and then they hit me, and said 'You had no right to become a Christian.'

Elma (age 12), video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

Three men entered the house and started searching without my consent... They said I had to bring them all our Gospels. I said 'We don't have - we just have a couple for ourselves'... I said, 'What did we do that you should enter our home like this? Are we murderers? Thieves? Criminals?' The man swore at me. He said it would be better for me to be a murderer or a thief than a Christian or a Jew.

Mina, (Elma's mother) video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

Raids on private residences tend to be directed against homes where Christians meet for church services or Bible studies, or where Christian leaders meet together.

Eight agents came in with guns and with weapons, and a camera to film and take photos. They came inside the home and filmed each person.... They gathered up all the computers and books... They brought [the thirteen church leaders] outside and put them all in a van. Two of them had children. The intelligence agents didn't even give them the opportunity to

pass their children over to someone else. They just took them all to the detention centre for interrogation.

Elham, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

4.6. Arrests and arbitrary detention

Christians are often arrested in private homes following house raids and taken to detention centres or prison for interrogation. However this is not always the case. The Inquiry heard Yaghoob explain how he was arrested in July 2014:

I was listening to Christian songs in my car, when all of a sudden, a car pulled in front of me. There were four people dressed in black. They all got out of the car. They opened the door of my car, and took me to their own car... The person who had been standing further back opened the door and sat next to me in the car, and started hitting me. They were asking me continuously, 'Where are the New Testaments?' As he was hitting me, he would keep asking the same question over and over... He would threaten me, saying, 'I will kill you.'

Yaghoob, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

Yaghoob was detained and interrogated for many weeks following his arrest.

When Christians are arrested, often their families and friends are not notified of who has taken them, or where they have gone. For days or even weeks, the loved one is simply missing.

For a whole week we didn't have any information about Mostafa. And his family searched for him... but they couldn't find out where he was, or what happened to him.

Gilda, Mostafa's wife, filmed 27 November 2014

An arrest of a Christian leader negatively and profoundly impacts the church (or churches) that they led. Church members are often too scared to meet with each other following the arrest of their leader, or fellow members. It can take a long time before these Christians feel they are safely able to have contact with other Christians again.

We had 30-40 members in our house church but they have no pastor at the moment; they have been scattered.

Yaghoob, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

Each arrest entails its own trauma for the individuals and their loved ones, and the number of estimated arrests has increased from previous years. During Rouhani's presidency, the MOIS has not diminished its efforts to crush the growth of the church through the arrest and detention of Christian leaders and those seen to be involved in Christian ministry.

At least 75 Christians were arrested in 2014.

Open Doors submission to the Inquiry

4.7. Interrogation

Interrogations of Christian detainees or prisoners are most often perpetrated by agents of the MOIS. Detainees often endure sessions of interrogation that last many hours, and face regular sessions across many days or weeks, in between which they are generally held in solitary confinement.

The interrogations were between 12 at night to 5 in the morning to pressurise them mentally and psychologically.

Faraz Dolatkah, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

The interrogations were very long, sometimes, six hours or seven.

Mostafa Bordbar, video testimony, filmed 27 November 2014

The methods of interrogations in jail have become harsher. In several cases, Christians were seriously physically and mentally abused, including threats of execution.

They took me to the central intelligence office in our city. Then they started beating me up again. I don't know how long it took; maybe 10 to 15 minutes. My lips were split. My mouth was full of blood... He pushed me off the chair, and then put his hand on my throat as if he was choking me. The main question was, 'Where do you get the New Testaments from?'

Yaghoob, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

For the three sisters, most of the time a familiar female voice was broadcast as if she was being tortured, and they constantly heard it while they were being interrogated. It affected them very badly psychologically... In one of the interrogations of one of the ladies, they hit her several times in the face with a shoe, and one of the other ladies, they kicked her so much that she fell down to the floor. But they kept on kicking her.

Elham, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

Whenever any convert to Christianity is arrested, pressure is put on them to persuade them to return to Islam during interrogation and throughout their time in detention.

We hear story after story of people being forced to sit and listen to mullahs or high-ranking scholars - professors of Islam... They speak constantly against the Bible.

David Yeghnazar, Elam Ministries, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

After solitary cell, they put me in another cell with a junior of the government of Iran, to convert me to Islam. For fifty days he tried to attack Christianity.

Mostafa Bordbar, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

Unfortunately the intelligence service summoned me back after seven days [following the raid on my home]. They interrogated me in front of my brother-in-law... They said, 'If you stay in this country and don't return to Islam, we will kidnap your children and you, and kill your husband.'

Mina, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

4.8. Conditions in prisons and detention centres

Mistreatment and abuse, both physical and psychological, are rife in Iran's detention centres and prisons, where many Christians are housed to serve sentences or during pre-trial investigation.

They put me in a very small cell... I had to sleep on the floor. They gave me very dirty clothes. For 26 days, I was in my cell alone.

Sara Akhavan Fard, Westminster hearing, 16 December 2014

I had no shoes or socks during those 17 days in the detention centre. And at the end of my time I couldn't even stand up because of the pain in my feet.

Yaghoob, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

The Inquiry heard from Faraz Dolatkah about a group of Christians in Iran who were arrested in early 2013, but whose cases continued to be under investigation at the time of the Inquiry (December 2014):

This dear sister said to me: 'They would torture us sexually with sexual threats... They would say the house groups are a place of prostitution - not worship. They would look at us with sexual desires.'

Faraz Dolatkah, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

Despite Iranian laws which dictate that prisoners of conscience should be imprisoned separately from prisoners convicted of violent crimes, in reality, this rule is often violated. Farshid Fathi (Christian pastor, imprisoned since December 2010) suffered an injury in April 2014 during a violent raid on ward 350 of Evin prison. He was subsequently moved in August 2014 to a more brutal prison: Rajai Shahr (Gohardasht). At time of printing, he remains there, incarcerated alongside hardened criminals.

They put [Farshid] with many drug addicts in a very dirty place between many hard prisoners... Even he couldn't call his family and he couldn't have his Bible. Even his clothes were taken. They took all his things.

Sara Akhavan Fard, Westminster hearing, 16 December 2014

Farshid Fathi was not the only Christian prisoner who was violently beaten in 2014: Behnam Irani, Saeed Abedini, Silas Rabbani, Maryam Naghash Zargaran and Amin Khaki were also reported to have been physically abused while serving their sentences.

The most common form of mistreatment of Christians in prisons and detention centres is psychological. Christians are told that loved ones are sick, that spouses have been unfaithful, or that elderly parents are also imprisoned, to put pressure on the prisoner. Some guards, as well as interrogators, torment prisoners with psychological games.

One of the guards came to our cell, and said, 'Sara, get ready, you should come with us.' And my sister [Leila] asked them, 'Where are you taking Sara?' The guard laughed, and said, 'We are going to kill her'. And I really got scared... I changed my clothes and I followed her, and as I followed her, I understood they were not going to kill me: they were going to let me out of the prison. But they said this lie to Leila to put her under more pressure.

Sara Akhavan Fard, Westminster hearing, 16 December 2014

4.9. Court-issued punishments

Those Christians whose cases are brought to court tend to be convicted on political rather than explicitly religious charges, usually under the vague and often abused 'Security Laws' section of the penal code. Sentences issued to Christians tend to range between one year and eight years.

People are sometimes accused of political crimes, when what they have been involved in is religious activities.

Ajay Sharma, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

They are usually tried in Revolutionary Courts, which are effectively national security courts.

Dr Shaheed's Submission to the Inquiry

The Iranian judiciary has used various new methods to further intimidate Christian prisoners, and the Christian community in general, during Rouhani's presidency.

In a worrying development under Rouhani, three Christian converts were charged with the capital offences of *Mofsed-e-filarz* (spreading corruption on earth) and *Moharebeh* (enmity against God).

CSW Submission to the Inquiry

Moharebah is a charge most often used against dissident journalists, political activists and human rights defenders: it is a 'sweeping and aggressive charge', according to Dr. Shaheed, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran. In the aforementioned case, the charges were overturned at appeal. However, there are fears that these serious charges could be applied again to Christians in the future.

Christians are not only in danger of facing long prison sentences: they can also face corporal punishment. One known Christian prisoner was sentenced to 70 lashes in December 2014: it is believed the punishment will be carried out when his prison term concludes. Lashes have been meted out in other cases during Rouhani's presidency:

In October 2013, four Christians from a house church network were sentenced to 80 lashes for taking communion, with the sentence being carried out on at least two of the four men soon thereafter.

CSW Submission to the Inquiry

At the first stage, all of the men were sentenced to 60 lashes and the ladies to 48 lashes each... And also one year in prison for all of them. The sentence still hasn't been confirmed.

Elham, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

A further way that the judiciary can intimidate Christians is by applying fresh charges to prisoners. Behnam Irani (a pastor imprisoned since 2011) received eighteen new charges in 2014. Thankfully these were subsequently dropped, but not before the pastor and his family had been subjected to significant trauma and stress. Similarly, upon his transfer to Rajai Shahr prison in August 2014, Farshid Fathi was informed that he was being charged with possession of alcohol while in Evin prison. He was summoned to court on 29

December 2014, falsely convicted and given a further one year sentence. It is believed an appeal is pending.

Occasionally, a Christian is acquitted of charges related to their Christian activities, but the Inquiry heard that such rare acquittals are due to the attitudes of individual judges, rather than a signal of judiciary-wide reformation. The Inquiry heard that Mostafa Bordbar was acquitted of national security charges in November 2013, because his appeal was heard by an independent judge, rather than a judge that was affiliated with the MOIS. The judge ruled that Mostafa's Christian activities did not constitute any crime against the Islamic Republic. However, many Christians have their sentences upheld at appeal.

A Christian defendant has not been reported to have been sentenced to death since Yousef Nadarkhani received a death sentence in 2010 for apostasy (abandoning Islam). However, most Christians who have been detained report that they were threatened with the death penalty many times by interrogators and guards. The possibility remains that male Christians could be sentenced to death for apostasy: although apostasy is not encoded in Iran's laws, judges can invoke Article 167 of Iran's Constitution, which allows them to refer to 'authentic Islamic sources or authoritative Fatwas' when making their judgements. Under Sharia law, apostasy is punishable by death for men and life imprisonment for women. Christians could also potentially face death sentences for the aforementioned crimes of *Moharebeh* or *Mofsed-e-filarz*.

4.10. Pressure to flee

To avoid serving unjust prison sentences, many Christians and their families flee Iran, meaning that Iran's harsh policies are prompting an exodus of Christians from the country.

We received a summons [to court]. [Yaghoob] said, 'We have to leave the country or I may go to prison, and they may abuse you, or pressure us to become Muslim again.'

Mina, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

Indeed, the primary goal of the MOIS seems to be to terrorise Christians (especially leaders/pastors) into leaving Iran as refugees. One group of Christians who faced trial in east Iran in autumn 2014 were told by the judge that the court was deliberately delaying issuing a verdict against them, in order to give the group time to flee the country.

Christians who leave Iran voluntarily save Iran the high costs of court cases, the costs of housing Christians in prisons for many years and crucially, it saves Iran from further international outcry. The Inquiry heard that the government wants to see the Christian community remove itself from the country, for there are simply too many of them to jail.

They bailed them, and also threatened to kill them... in a way they force these people to flee Iran.

Faraz Dolatkah, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

4.11. Lack of due process

Article 32 of Iran's Constitution states that all detainees must be formally charged in writing within 24 hours of detention. Article 32 of the Code of Criminal Procedure allows for detainees to be held for longer without charge if a judge has issued a

temporary detention order for cases involving the Security Laws, but article 33 gives the accused the right to appeal his/her detention order within 10 days.

Each year, scores of Christians are detained for weeks or months without being formally charged, without access to a lawyer, and without any opportunity to be brought before a judge. Due process is flagrantly violated in the cases of most Christians.

They arrested everybody in the house. The leaders asked, 'Do you have warrants to arrest us?' But they didn't show any warrants.

Faraz Dolatkah, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

At first, they didn't allow me to have a lawyer. But after - I think - one and a half months, then they allowed me to have a lawyer. But they didn't let me meet him. Some days before the court, my wife found a human rights activist lawyer, and at the court I had two lawyers: one by force and one by choice. At the court, the judge didn't let me talk normally. He had decided to do anything he wanted. They gave me a ten-year sentence.

Mostafa Bordbar, video testimony, filmed 27 November 2014

4.12. Unjust bail

Extortionate sums are often demanded for the temporary release of Christian prisoners. The deeds to homes or businesses are sometimes submitted, meaning that Christian families can lose these assets if the charged individual does not go to court when summoned. Thus extraordinary economic pressure is placed on the Christian community.

Bail conditions for those Christians arrested are often high - up to the equivalent of \$200,000, often necessitating the submission of land and property titles deeds.

MEC Submission to the Inquiry

They gave [four Christians who were arrested in 2014] very heavy bails: around 400 million or 350 million.

Elham, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

4.13. Appropriation of property

The authorities seized a large and valuable private home belonging to a prominent Iranian Christian leader, because of his Christian ministry. An appeal against the confiscation was heard, and was unsuccessful, in early 2014. The property is now in the possession of the government.

The wife of Christian prisoner Rasoul Abdollahi (who began serving a three-year sentence in December 2013 and was released in February 2015) was forced to hand over the family home in Tehran to the authorities in spring 2014. It seems very likely that these are not isolated examples of this form of persecution.

4.14. Social and political restrictions

Armenian and Assyrian Christians are recognised as legitimate religious minorities under Iran's Constitution. However, they do face difficulties in Iran, and do not have the same status or the same rights as Shia Muslim citizens. Before the law, in society and civic life, constitutional recognition does not protect them from discrimination.

Traditional Persian Jewish, Armenian and Assyrian Christian, and Zoroastrian communities are technically recognised

and protected under Iranian law, but they are relegated to second class status. For example, the regime likes to tout the fact that a limited number of token Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians have seats in its rubber stamp parliament, or Majlis. That's because these minorities are not allowed to contest other seats.

Sohrab Ahmari, Wall Street Journal, Westminster hearing, 16 December 2014

Converts to Christianity have additional battles to face in daily life. Most converts still have names that identify them as having a Muslim heritage. Given that conversion is not tolerated, these individuals are still viewed and treated as Muslim in Iranian law and bureaucracy.

For someone who has become a Christian, it's very hard for them to get legally married unless they have an Islamic ceremony - and many of them do not want to have an Islamic ceremony... And I know several people who... were not allowed to name their children the name they wanted if it was not an Islamic name.

David Yeghnazar, Elam Ministries, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

4.15. Discrimination in education and employment

Iran's laws and policies, which create a framework of discrimination and which directly impede religious freedom, have not changed since Rouhani became President.

There continues to be a limit to how high religious minorities can ascend in their careers. The 'gozinesh criterion', a selection procedure requiring prospective state officials and employees to demonstrate allegiance to the Islamic Republic of Iran and the state religion, puts a glass ceiling onto the career prospects of religious minorities.

Jewish, Zoroastrian and Christian minorities are barred from serving in the officer corps and various other official bodies.

Sohrab Ahmari, Wall Street Journal, Westminster hearing, 16 December 2014

Schools belonging to religious minorities are often headed by Shia Muslim directors or overseen by Muslim Superintendents.

Sohrab Ahmari, Wall Street Journal, Westminster hearing, 16 December 2014

Furthermore, conversion away from Islam can lead to the loss of a job in state institutions, or in cases where the employer does not tolerate conversion. The Inquiry heard from Ermia who was sacked in summer 2013:

I worked in a pharmacy of a state hospital in Tehran. From the boss of the department, I was given a letter, because my colleagues had found out that I had become a Christian. And the boss also heard about this. Despite all my colleagues testifying that I was a good employee and was conscientious in my work, still they gave me a letter telling me I was sacked... Because of the connections between the hospitals, I wasn't able to find work in another hospital.

Ermia, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

With regards to education, according to Dr Shaheed, University regulations continue to officially grant admission only to Muslims or members of officially recognized minority religions. Christian converts and unrecognised religious minorities can face pressure within academic institutions; or lose opportunities for education or the right to complete educational courses because of their faith. Elham, Ermia's wife, was removed from her university course a few months after her pastor was detained and interrogated by the MOIS.

When my pastor was freed from prison, she said to me, 'During interrogation, I was given a list and your name was on the list'... I was thrown out [of university]. I cannot give any reason why they threw me out: morally and educationally I had no problems. I asked them to let me study my last term on my own, if my presence was causing problems. They didn't let me stay. They didn't even give me any documentation about the courses I had completed... They said, 'The rules of the university do not allow us to keep you here.'

Elham, video testimony, filmed 26 November 2014

5. Recommendations

We want the UK Parliament to put pressure on the Iranian regime and highlight the fact that the Iranian people are undergoing persecution. The regime might present themselves very well, but if the UK Parliament shows that it knows what is really happening then they might ease the pressure on the house churches.

Faraz Dolatkhah, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

The Christians in Parliament APPG and the APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief concur with the recommendations of Dr Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, to the Iranian government, as found in the appendix to this report. Further, the APPGs make the following recommendations, reflecting the seriousness that the panel feels should be attached to the rights of religious minorities in Iran.

5.1. To the British government

- a) We ask the British Government to use appropriate channels to urge the Islamic Republic of Iran to uphold its obligations under international law to protect the human rights of all its citizens, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, as articulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a party.
- b) We ask the British Government to request the release of prisoners of conscience upon the occasion of Norouz (Persian New Year), who are serving prison sentences solely for reason of their religious beliefs or activities.
- c) We ask the British Government to ensure that any upgrade of

diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic is contingent on a significant improvement in the protection of religious freedom for all Iranian citizens. Specifically that religious freedom, and human rights in general, are priority issues within the dialogue about the pending re-opening of Iran's Embassy in London.

- d) We ask the British Government, in 2015 and 2016, to vote in support of the renewal of the mandate of the United Nations special rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, and to actively encourage other member states of the Human Rights Council to do likewise.
- e) We ask the British Government to appoint a UK Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) within the FCO, and work to appoint an EU Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.
- f) We ask the British Government to produce an annual FoRB report to show what the government is doing to promote FoRB around the world.

5.3. To Persian-language news services

BBC Persian has about 12 million viewers in Iran according to a survey done in 2013. That's just in Iran - we also broadcast to Afghanistan, so we have a large audience.

Sadeq Saba, Editor of BBC Persian, Westminster hearing, 2 December 2014

We ask *BBC Persian Television, Voice of America Persian* and other Persian-language news services to broadcast more regularly about the persecution and discrimination that religious minorities face in Iran.

Appendix: Statement from Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran

In the months following my appointment to the United Nations Special Procedures, I noted that Iran possesses some of the basic tools to protect and promote human rights in the country, but concluded that the effect of certain national laws and practices undermine any intent to promote equality between men and women, or equity for the country's religious and ethnic minorities.

Iran is, for example, a party to two international treaties that clearly outline rights to freedom of expression, conscience, religion, education, and to work; stipulating that these rights must be equally enjoyed, regardless of gender, religion, or ethnicity, and prescribing very narrow limits in which these rights may be restricted. Although the Iranian constitution also introduces these rights, certain constitutional, criminal, and civil legal provisions invariably give rise to second and third class citizens by either systematically limiting or completely denying existing rights protections to the country's religious minorities.

These laws and policies continue to essentially dictate who can enjoy basic rights, in what context these rights may be enjoyed, and to what extent. What Iranians are left with is a legal framework that is appropriated to harass, rather than protect religious minorities; restricting their religious practices and creating impediments to their education, freedom of expression, association, assembly, and to their economic opportunities.

Many of you may already be familiar with the fact that the Iranian constitution only recognizes the faith of Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, and that despite this recognition the followers of these religions continue to be accorded limited freedom to hold and practice their beliefs. As a starting point, recognition provisions forwarded in the Islamic Republic of Iran's Constitution remain at the heart of the matter; establishing a hierarchical framework that accords specific privileged status to adherents of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism and officially excludes members of unlisted religions like members of the Bahá'í community, or that of new groups or communities, from the full and equal right to manifest their religion or belief in accordance with the tenets of their faith.

In a reply to one of my reports the Government emphasized that adherents to recognized religions are entitled to manifest their beliefs, "within the limits of the law", which is governed by *velāyat-e faqīh*, or the Shia idea of the absolute guardianship of the Islamic jurist. The Iranian government has also resorted to a differentiation between "religions" and "sects" in order to make citizenship dependent on affiliation with recognized religions; and to deny members of unrecognized religions or to sects that manifest behaviour it considers tantamount to propaganda against the regime, the possibility of obtaining the status of legal personality. This includes sects of Christianity, like Evangelical Christians, that proselytize.

I should note that communities lacking legal personality status are faced with obstacles when trying to establish bank accounts, officially employ individuals to work for their community, or to establish private denominational schools. This in turn may have negative repercussions on

the ability, for example, to obtain property in order to establish places of worship. And although a legal personality status should be understood as an option, and not an obligation imposed on religious or belief communities by the State, status is compulsory in Iran in order to manifest beliefs, either publicly or privately. Those communities, for whatever reasons, that prefer not to obtain such a status, or that have difficulty registering as a legal entity continue to be penalized.

Members of “non-registered” religious communities continue to experience police harassment, surveillance or even criminal sanctions, as their activities are deemed illegal by the State or certain State agencies. Restrictive measures continue to include the confiscation of property, financial sanctions, imprisonment and in some cases even the use of torture. Target groups may include communities that have been denied registration status against their will and communities not wishing to obtain any such legal status.

While many remain sceptical about the prospects for addressing these issues, I maintain cautious optimism; taking note of certain actions that signal political will to address international and national human rights concerns, but also bearing in mind that actions in the form of declarations or the repeal of laws and policies don’t necessarily translate into enduring or even cursory reform.

Last year, for example, I reported that the new Islamic Penal Code now omits any mention of “apostasy”, heresy, and witchcraft as criminal offences. Regardless, my reports to the United Nations General Assembly and Human Rights Council this past year continue to put forward concerns about the situation of Christians. Particular attention in these reports has been paid to the treatment of individuals who convert from Islam to

Christianity. Most of these individuals join Evangelical Christian churches, as opposed to the Armenian and Assyrian Christian denominations, which comprise the majority of Christians in the country, but don’t generally proselytize, or accept new converts; reportedly due in part to security reasons.

This year, converts report that they are specifically targeted for harassment and sometimes prosecution, because some Iranian officials see them as a threat to the governing political and religious systems, and sometimes as a tool of the West to undermine these structures. They argue that despite no longer being threatened by the charge of apostasy, Christian converts still face the threat of being charged with vague and overly-broad “national security” crimes, such as propaganda against the system, acting against national security, assembly and collusion against the system, insulting the Supreme Leader or the President, or “agitating the public consciousness.”

The number of arrests since President Rouhani took office has been difficult to ascertain, but reports that these arrests continue remain relatively unabated. On Christmas Day 2013, five Christian converts — Ahmad Bazyar, Faegheh Nasrollahi, Mastaneh Rastegari, Amir Hossein Nematollahi, and a man by the last name of Hosseini — were arrested in a house-church in Eastern Tehran. This past New Year’s Eve, four Christians were violently arrested at a holiday celebration in Karaj, outside of Tehran, by plainclothes security officials. In July of this year three individuals, including Pastor Matthias Haghnejad, were arrested and taken into custody. All had previously served prison time for acting against national security and propaganda against the system. And this October, three Iranian Christian converts, including one who was

producing a film on the life of Jesus, were also reportedly arrested.

Pastor Saeed Abedini continues to languish in prison, apparently for nothing more than expressing his faith. I have repeatedly appealed the Government of Iran to provide him with adequate access to medical care and to reconsider his case. In October, Iranian authorities apparently dropped capital charges against Pastor Behnam Irani in exchange for the addition of six years to his previous five-year prison sentence. If the current sentences hold, then, he will remain in prison through 2023.

It's important to continue to recognize that from a legal perspective—at least when it comes to arrests and prosecutions—Iran's persecution of religious minorities often resembles its persecution of government critics. And even though these religious communities – as communities – often shy away from politics, they're often seen by the Government through a political and “national security” lens. Evangelical Christians, Muslim Dervishes, and Bahá'ís alike are often charged with the same Penal Code violations as, for example, dissident journalists, political activists or human rights defenders. Iran's use of the crime of moharabeh – enmity against God – is both sweeping and aggressive, and again relatively unique within the Islamic world.

This continues to be evident in the cases of Christians arrested this past year where we see many hallmarks of the legal issues faced by religious minorities in Iran. That is, they are routinely charged with acting against national security; of conspiring with the Islamic Republic's foreign “enemies”; and of collusion against the Government by “organizing” gatherings or house churches. And they are usually tried in Revolutionary Courts, which are effectively national security courts.

Last month, the UN General Assembly's Third Committee voted to adopt its annual resolution on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, expressing its continued concern over the human rights situation in the country. The adoption of this resolution sends an important message of optimism tempered by the need for concrete actions that result in comprehensive and equal protections for the rights promulgated by the international human rights treaties.

Recommendations

President Rouhani's election has been, and continues to be viewed by many as an opportunity to introduce moderate legal and institutional reforms that result in improved protections for human rights. The positive signals and statements forwarded by President Rouhani and his government in the months following his election engendered an increase in international expectations for tangible and sustainable reforms, but unfortunately these reforms have not come to fruition to date.

For its part, the Iranian Government must take immediate and simple steps to address aspects of the legal system that work to arbitrarily exclude individuals from legal protections based on the government's own precepts of what constitutes a religion and the extent to which one may practice his/her beliefs. Steps must also be taken to ensure that respect for freedom of religion or belief as a human right does not depend on administrative registration procedures, as freedom of religion or belief has the status of a human right, prior to and independent from any acts of State approval.

Authorities must also cease utilizing overly-broad, vague, and seemingly mis-applied “national security” charges to restrict human rights. The need to ensure

“public order” and related national security should not in itself jeopardize such rights as religious freedom or freedom of expression. Rather, restrictions on fundamental rights must be the exception and not the norm.

Furthermore, Iran should offer appropriate options for religious or belief communities to achieve the status of legal personality on a domestic level, a status needed for undertaking important community functions relevant for the full exercise of freedom of religion or belief. Registration procedures for obtaining legal personality status should be quick, transparent, fair, inclusive and non-discriminatory.

Iran should refrain from exercising pressure on religious or belief groups whose members prefer not to be registered as legal entities under domestic law; and the Government should instruct law enforcement and judicial officials that religious activities of non-registered religious or belief communities are not illegal, as the status of freedom of religion or belief prevails over any acts of State registration.

Iran should review its registration decisions to ensure they are clearly defined formal elements of law and in conformity with international law. Registration should neither depend on extensive formal requirements in terms of the number of members and the time a particular community has existed, nor should it depend on the review of the substantive content of the belief, the structure of the community and methods of appointment of the clergy.

Iran must also provide effective legal remedies for individuals or groups complaining about the denial or arbitrary delay of registration as a legal personality, and should refrain from arbitrarily stripping certain religious or belief communities of

legal personality they had possessed before, as an instrument of exercising control or marginalizing groups.

We must also continue to hold Iran accountable to the benchmarks it will accept this coming March as a result of Iran’s Universal Periodic Review this past October, during which a significant number of similar recommendations to that of 2010 were forwarded by member states and signalling the international community’s recognition that virtually no real progress in addressing problematic legal and long-term official practices has been achieved.

My engagement with Iranian officials and the Government’s cooperation with my mandate remains perfunctory and reflective of the fact that no single view about how to engage with the international community’s concerns governs Iran’s approach to achieving its clear goal to play a prominent role on the international stage. However, if the government chooses to take a path towards constructive engagement on these issues of concern, if it expresses its determination to strengthen the promotion and protection of human rights for all Iranians, it will find in me, and in the wider international community, partners in addressing these deep structural and legal issues, which go to the heart of the Islamic Republic’s most alarming problems.



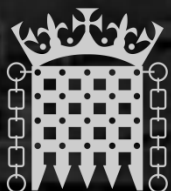
**FREEDOM
DECLARED**

To contact the Christians in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group, please write to us at:

**Christians in Parliament APPG
Room 484, Portcullis House
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To contact the All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, please write to us at:

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This report is available online at:
www.christiansinparliament.org.uk
www.freedomdeclared.org

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