

IRAN

CHRISTIANS SENTENCED FOR PRACTISING THEIR FAITH

Iranian Christians Victor Bet-Tamraz, his wife Shamiram Issavi, Amin Afshar-Naderi and Hadi Asgari, have been sentenced to a combined total of 45 years in prison solely for practising their Christian faith. If imprisoned, they would be prisoners of



Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz and Shamiram Issavi, ethnic Assyrian Christians, and Amin Afshar-Naderi and Hadi Asgari, Christian converts (*pictured here in that order*), have been sentenced to between five and 15 years in prison. They have been targeted solely for peacefully practising their Christian faith. The authorities have cited peaceful activities such as holding private Christmas gatherings, organizing and conducting house churches, and travelling outside Iran to attend Christian seminars, as “illegal church activities” which “threaten national security” in order justify their convictions. The individuals, who are all currently free on bail, are awaiting the verdict of the appeal court.



On 26 December 2014, **Victor Bet-Tamraz**, was arrested with **Amin Afshar-Naderi** and one other individual after plain-clothed security forces raided his home in Tehran during a private Christmas gathering. They were taken to Tehran’s Evin prison where they had no access to their lawyers and little contact with their families. They were released on bail several months later. On 21 May 2017, they were put on trial with **Hadi Asgari**, who had been arrested in a separate incident on 26 August 2016 in the city of Firuzkuh, Tehran Province. In July 2017, Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced each of them to 10 years in prison on the charge of “forming a group composed of more than two people with the purpose of disrupting national security” in relation to their church activities. The same court sentenced **Amin Afshar-Naderi** to a further five years in prison for “insulting Islamic sanctities” for a comical Facebook post he shared from someone else’s account that adopted a Quranic writing style about the sharp rise in the price of chicken in Iran. Hadi Asgari was released on bail in April 2018.



On 19 June 2017, Shamiram Issavi was summoned to the Office of the Prosecutor in Evin prison and charged with offences related to her practicing her Christian faith. In January 2018, Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced her to five years in prison for “membership of a group with the purpose of disrupting national security” and another five years in prison for “gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security.”

Please send a letter without delay. (Postage is \$2.50.) **Urge the authorities**

* to quash the convictions and sentences of Victor Bet-Tamraz, Shamiram Issavi, Amin Afshar-Naderi, and Hadi Asgari, as they have been targeted solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedoms of religion and belief, expression, and association, through their Christian faith;

* to stop the harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention, and imprisonment of Christians, including converts;

* to respect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to have or to adopt or change a religion or belief of one's choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching, as guaranteed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party.

Mail your appeals to

Head of the Judiciary

Ayatollah Sadeghi Larijani
c/o Public Relations Office
Number 4, Dead end of 1 Azizi
Above Pasteur Intersection
Vali Asr Street
Tehran, Iran
Salutation: Your Excellency

Prosecutor General of Tehran

Abbas Ja'fari Dolat Abadi
Office of the General and Revolutionary
Prosecutor
Corner (Nabsh-e) of 15 Khordad Square
Tehran
Iran
Salutation: Dear Sir

Please send a copy to

Deputy for Human Rights and International Affairs, Ministry of Justice

Mahmoud Abbasi
Number 1638, Below Vali Asr Square
Vali Asr Avenue
Tehran, Iran

Additional information

Ordained minister Victor Bet-Tamraz and his family have been persecuted by the Iranian authorities for years, solely for practising their Christian faith. In March 2009, the Pentecostal Assyrian Church in Tehran, which Victor Bet-Tamraz was leading, was forcibly shut down by the Ministry of Interior because it held Persian-speaking services. Ethnic Christian churches like Assyrian (Chaldean) and Armenian churches are permitted to hold services in their own languages only and not in Persian. The church was later allowed to reopen but only after Victor Bet-Tamraz was forcibly removed as the church leader by the authorities and replaced. Under the new leadership, the church services continued in Assyrian only.

Victor Bet-Tamraz's son, **Ramiel Bet-Tamraz** has also been targeted. On 26 August 2016 in the city of Firuzkuh, Ministry of Intelligence officials arrested him, along with four other Christians,

during a picnic. The four included Amin Afshar-Naderi – who had been released in February 2015 following his earlier arrest – and Hadi Asgari. Ramiel Bet-Tamraz and the others were taken to Evin prison where they were held in Section 209, which is under the control of the Ministry of Intelligence. They were allowed only one brief telephone call to their families during the first month of their detention. They were interrogated repeatedly without a lawyer present, and asked questions about their individual Christian activities as well as about Victor Bet-Tamraz. Ramiel Bet-Tamraz was released on bail on 10 October 2016. Following a short trial session which took place on 18 June 2018 before Branch 26 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, Ramiel Bet-Tamraz was sentenced to four months in prison for “spreading propaganda against the system” through “membership of illegal house churches”. He has appealed his conviction. Separately, Amin Afshar-Naderi was released on bail in July 2017 and was later sentenced to a total of 15 years in prison. Hadi Asgari was released on bail in April 2018 and was later sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Iran is home to several Christian denominations, including Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox Armenian, and Assyrian (Chaldean) Christians. Christians are one of the few religious minorities officially recognized in Iran’s Constitution. However, the Constitution provides only limited protections to Christians while Christian converts are provided no protection at all under the law. Consequently, Christians in Iran have been a target of harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention, unfair trials, and imprisonment on national security-related charges solely because of their faith. In the past year alone, dozens of Christians, mostly Christian converts, have been targeted.

Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who has been in and out of prison for a number of years solely for peacefully practising his Christian faith, has been targeted again by the authorities. In June 2017, he was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment on the charge of “forming a group composed of more than two people with the purpose of disrupting national security” for “establishing a house church” among other peaceful activities as a Christian. He has also been sentenced to two years of internal exile in the city of Nik Shahr, Sistan and Baluchestan Province in the south-east of Iran, which is over a thousand miles away from his home city of Rasht, Gilan Province, in the north of the country. His sentence was upheld by an appeal court in May 2018. He was out of prison on bail when he was arrested on 22 July 2018 by plain-clothed security forces. They forced their way into his home and used an electroshock weapon (taser gun) on his son, leaving him incapacitated. They also beat Yousef Nadarkhani and used an electroshock weapon on him. Neither he nor his son had put up any resistance during his arrest. Yousef Nadarkhani was transferred to the quarantine section of Evin prison before being taken to Building 8, which is a general ward. Amnesty International believes that he has been arrested to serve his 10-year prison sentence.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a state party, states that “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 teach” and that persons belonging to religious minorities “shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.” This framework also protects the right to convert from one religion or belief to another without repercussions from the state.