

Celebrating Nowruz



Nowruz Haft-sin table

1) What is Nowruz?

Nowruz [pronounced NO-ROOZ- in Persian means "New-day"] is the Iranian New Year and marks the first day of Spring. Nowruz begins precisely with the beginning of Spring on the vernal equinox; on the 1st day of Farvardin of the Iranian solar calendar which is usually March 20th or 21st. It is the biggest holiday celebrated by Iranians; a time of joy, celebration with family and friends, shared by people of all faiths that trace their history back through the centuries to the ancient Mesopotamian civilization and the Persian Empire. It has been celebrated for at least 3,000 years and is rooted in the rituals and traditions of the Zoroastrian religion.

2) Plan a Nowruz Event

Nowruz is an opportunity to not only bring awareness to the human rights situation in Iran, but to bring communities together to celebrate, learn about Iranian culture, and make new friends. On such a joyful occasion, so many Iranians are behind bars and away from their families; their seats at the celebrations are empty. Help let them know that we remember them, and are thinking about them by writing on behalf of Iranian prisoners and/or sending solidarity messages to their families.

In the past several years, successful events were held in Toronto and a couple of other Canadian cities. This year, we are hoping for even more people across Canada and around the world to mark this occasion and we encourage you to get involved.

If you have been thinking about how you can raise awareness amongst your Amnesty group, your community or even your friends, think about organizing a Nowruz gathering. Your event can include fun, awareness-raising and advocacy, all at the same time.



Human Rights Haft-sin. Nowruz event by Amnesty International Iran Action Circle in Toronto, Canada. March 2016 (Photo by Bahare Khodabande)

3) Ideas and suggestions for a Nowruz event

Celebrating Nowruz does not have to be a huge event. You can raise awareness by taking time to talk about Iran, its people, its history and its challenges and needless to say, by taking action! Here are some suggestions:

- ✧ Do you enjoy cooking? Consider inviting friends over for dinner to sample some Iranian dishes. Need recipes? visit <http://www.mypersiankitchen.com>. Organize a potluck if you want to assign a dish to those you have invited.
- ✧ Movie night: organize a movie night.
- ✧ Poetry night: poetry has been part of Iranian culture since ancient times. There are many Iranian poets (classic and contemporary) whom we can point you to for hosting a poetry night.
- ✧ Book club discussion: there are many informative books on Iran with underlying social and human rights tones that can provide interesting book club discussions.
- ✧ Go all the way: you can also include a “Haft-sin (aka Haft-sinn and Haft-seen)” table. Haft-sin or **the seven S's** is a traditional table setting of Nowruz. The Haft-sin table includes seven items starting with the letter *seen* (س) in the Persian alphabet. Each "س" is a symbol. Check the following link for more information: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haft-Seen>
- ✧ If none of the above is possible or does not interest you, please consider taking action on behalf of seven prisoners in Iran – as an individual or in a group. We are asking activists to send Nowruz greetings to the prisoners featured in this action along with writing on their behalf. Following the initiative by Amnesty USA, we have included seven cases in honour of the Haft-Sin (the seven S's) tradition.

And please don't forget to share the news and photos from your event with us! You can email us at IranCoordinator@amnesty.ca.



Nowruz Action

کارزار نوروز

The Iranian holiday Nowruz نوروز (“New Day”) is an ancient holiday celebrated on the first day of spring to welcome in the New Year. On this Nowruz we want to remember several prisoners in Iran with Nowruz greetings. We ask you to send cards with simple Nowruz greetings such as “Nowruz mobarak” نوروز مبارک

You can say “thinking of you at Nowruz time” or “hoping you are well.” You may send a greeting in either English or Farsi (Persian) but please do not mention Amnesty International or specifics of the recipient’s case. Please also refrain from mentioning the political situation or human rights. We suggest sending cards with pictures of landscapes, spring flowers or the like, in keeping with the spirit of the holiday and the message of hope and renewal. Please do not choose cards that have pictures of people, and please do not use cards that depict bottles of wine or other alcoholic beverages. Non-religious cards are strongly recommended.

Traditional Nowruz celebrations include the preparation of a Haft Sin table which literally means the seven S’s. Seven items beginning with the Persian letter sin (equivalent to the English S) and which represent spring time are set out. To honor this tradition, this year Amnesty International has selected seven cases, all of them prisoners for whom we have been campaigning. Several of them have been sentenced to long prison terms for their peaceful activism and several are in poor health.

Our previous Nowruz actions have been very successful! Hundreds of letters and solidarity messages were sent from Amnesty members across Canada. Mostafa Azizi and Bahareh Hedayat, featured in our Nowruz campaign last year, have been released from prison. Hossein Rafiee, also part of the Nowruz casefile in 2016, was granted a much needed medical furlough. While there have been positive developments, it is only one step in our campaign to prevent and end grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination. Writing letters has real impact on real lives. Be it an advocacy action or a solidarity one, your efforts really matter! Thank you for joining us!

Please see next pages.

Mehdi and Hossein Rajabian



Brothers **Mehdi Rajabian** (musician) and **Hossein Rajabian** (filmmaker) began serving their sentences of 3 years imprisonment each in June 2016. A Revolutionary Court convicted the brothers in April 2015 of “insulting Islamic sanctities”, “spreading propaganda against the system” and “illegal audio-visual activities”, and sentenced them to 6 years' imprisonment. A court of appeal later suspended three years of their sentences for a period of five years, conditional on their “good behaviour”.

The charges arose from the brothers' artistic work. This includes a feature film by **Hossein Rajabian** dealing with women's rights to divorce in Iran, and **Mehdi Rajabian**'s distribution of unlicensed music by Iranian singers and bands from outside the country whose lyrics are political or cover taboo subjects that the Iranian authorities deem to be “un-Islamic”, “perverse” or “anti-revolutionary”. Mehdi was also rebuked for broadcasting the voices of female singers.

Following their arrests in October 2013, the brothers were held for two months in solitary confinement, where they said they were subjected to torture and other ill treatment, including being beaten and given electric shocks in an effort to force the brothers into making video “confessions”. Their “confessions” were used as evidence against them to secure their convictions in court, even though they told the judge that they had been obtained through torture. They also had no access to a lawyer at any stage of their arrest, detention or trial, whether at first instance or appeal.

Both brothers are in poor health. They went on hunger strike on 28 October 2016 to demand their freedom. This had followed an earlier hunger strike by the brothers in September in protest at the authorities' refusal to allow them both adequate medical care or medical leave, and their decision to separate the brothers by holding them in different sections of Tehran's Evin Prison. **Mehdi Rajabian** was granted medical leave on 17 November, but was forced to return to prison on 4 December. He has several medical conditions including multiple sclerosis (MS), for which he needs medication and specialized medical care. **Hossein Rajabian** was suffering with kidney problems prior to going into prison and has experienced severe fever-like symptoms while in prison.

You can send Nowruz greetings for the **Rajabian brothers** and/or their family via:

Iran Coordinator, Amnesty International
1992 Yonge St. 3rd floor
Toronto ON
M4S 1Z7

Saeed Malekpour



Web programmer **Saeed Malekpour**, an Iranian national with Permanent Resident status in Canada, has been imprisoned in Iran since his arrest on 4 October 2008. He is serving a life sentence in Evin Prison.

In late 2010, he was initially sentenced to death for “spreading corruption on earth” in relation to a web program he created for uploading photos which the Iranian authorities said was used on pornographic websites. This was an open source program and **Saeed Malekpour** has maintained that the use of this web program on other websites was without his knowledge.

His death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in 2012. **Saeed Malekpour** was also sentenced at the same time to seven and a half years’ imprisonment on vaguely worded charges, including “insulting the Leader”, “insulting the President”, “insulting Islamic sanctities”, and “spreading propaganda against the system”. These charges were also in relation to the web program as well as the public letter **Saeed Malekpour** wrote in 2010 detailing the torture he was subjected to while in pre-trial detention.

Saeed Malekpour has said that he was tortured and otherwise ill treated following his arrest, including during an extended period of solitary confinement that lasted over one year. He has also said that he was denied medical care for the injuries he sustained as a result of torture and other ill treatment. His televised “confessions”, which he says were made under torture, were subsequently used as “evidence” to secure his conviction in court. His sister has told Amnesty International her brother’s forced televised “confessions” are the only “evidence” that was presented against him in court.

Saeed Malekpour’s arrest and sentencing was part of a larger operation called Gerdab (Whirlpool), which was conducted by the Cyber Crimes Unit of the Revolutionary Guards in 2008 and sought to crack down on on-line activities deemed “immoral” or “un-Islamic”.

Sign a petition for Saeed Malekpour: <http://amn.st/61828THqw>

You can send Nowruz greetings for Saeed Malekpour and/or his family via:

Iran Coordinator
Amnesty International
1992 Yonge St. 3rd floor
Toronto ON
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Mahvash Sabet



Photo: PEN International

Mahvash Sabet is a 63-year-old leader in the persecuted minority religious community of the Baha'i, serving a 10-year prison sentence (out of 20-years' imprisonment) at Evin Prison in Tehran. She is a former teacher and poet and the director of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, an alternative school for Baha'i youth prohibited from attending university in Iran. **Mahvash Sabet** was also the secretary of the informal group known as the "Yaran", or "Friends," which catered to the spiritual and social needs of the Iranian Baha'is.

Mahvash Sabet – along with six other leaders of the Baha'i community - was arrested in 2008 on vaguely worded charges related to national security. The seven Baha'i leaders were finally convicted in 2010 of "espionage for Israel," "insulting religious sanctities," and "propaganda against the system".

On 19 December 2013 the seven Baha'i leaders wrote a joint open letter to President Hassan Rouhani. In the letter they expressed their happiness over Rouhani's invitation to have an open discussion regarding civil rights, but added that they are writing the letter from inside prison and have been imprisoned for more than five years solely because of their faith. They continued on to say that "the arrest of thousands of Baha'i citizens and the group's 20-year prison sentences confirm the discrimination and racism present in society and the instability of law to protect the minorities".

While imprisoned, **Mahvash Sabet** has published a collection of poetry collectively entitled "Prison Poems". In the poem titled The Perfume of Poetry, **Mahvash Sabet** writes of her fellow prisoners in the women's ward:

*I write if only to stir faint memories of flight
in these wing-bound birds,
to open the cage of the heart for a moment
trapped without words.*

*For how can one not faint for these women,
beaten so brutally?
How can one not fear for them, suffering
such tyrannical cruelty?*

You can send Nowruz greetings for Mahvash Sabet and/or her family via:

Iran Coordinator

Amnesty International

1992 Yonge St. 3rd floor

Toronto ON M4S 1Z7 **(DO NOT MENTION AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL)**

Mohammad Ali Taheri



Spiritual teacher **Mohammad Ali Taheri** has been languishing in solitary confinement in Section 2A of Tehran's Evin Prison for over five years.

Authorities have refused to release him even though he has completed his 5-year prison sentence, which had been imposed on him for "insulting Islamic sanctities" by establishing a spiritual doctrine and group called Erfan-e Halgheh. In June 2016, he was acquitted of a second charge of "spreading corruption on earth", for which he had been previously sentenced to death in August 2015.

Mohammad Ali Taheri is the founder of the spiritual doctrine "Erfan-e Keyhani AKA Erfan-e Halgheh." In 2006 he lawfully opened a cultural and educational institute in Tehran to develop and disseminate his newly found spiritual beliefs, and practice them with his students, in "healing sessions" apparently focused on alternative non-medicinal treatments. But things changed in 2010 when three offices of the institute in Tehran were shut down. He was arrested in May 2011 and has been suffering in prolonged solitary confinement since then. Over the course of his imprisonment, **Mohammad Ali Taheri** has undertaken a total of 16 hunger strikes and attempted suicide four times in protest at his solitary confinement, lack of access to his family and lawyer and repeated death threats against him and his family.

You can send Nowruz greetings to Mohammad Ali Taheri and/or his family via:

Iran Coordinator
Amnesty International
1992 Yonge St. 3rd floor
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Narges Mohammadi



Narges Mohammadi is a prominent human rights advocate in Iran campaigning for justice and gender equality, a supporter of the anti-death penalty campaign Legam (Step by Step to Abolish the Death Penalty) and Vice President of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders in Iran.

Narges Mohammadi has been in and out of prison for more than a decade for her support of human rights in Iran. She was last arrested at her home in May 2015 and taken to Evin Prison to continue serving her 6-years sentence.

In May 2016 Narges was sentenced to another 16 years in prison (upheld on appeal) after an unfair trial on security-related charges that relate to her peaceful human rights work. The court used as “evidence” interviews she gave to international media and her March 2014 meeting with the European Union’s then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton. Authorities have consistently used access to her nine-year-old twins as a tool to punish her, denying her telephone contact. Her twins, now nine, had to leave Iran to live with their father in France. She undertook a hunger strike in June 2016 to protest the authority’s refusal to let her speak with her children. Her hunger strike triggered global outrage and after 20 days and extensive global campaigning, Narges was able to speak with her children.

Narges is critically ill and needs specialized treatment. She suffers from pulmonary embolism (a blood clot in her lungs) and a neurological disorder that can result in seizures and temporary partial paralysis.

Narges Mohammadi was the Executive Chair of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) before the authorities shut it down in December 2008. Several others of the Centre’s members have been persecuted including prominent human rights lawyer **Abdolfattah Soltani** currently serving prison terms.

Sign a petition for Narges Mohammadi: <http://amn.st/60138JEHT>

You can send Nowruz greetings to Narges Mohammadi and/or her family via:

Iran Coordinator
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1992 Yonge St. 3rd floor
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M4S 1Z7

Keywan Karimi



Keywan Karimi, a member of Iran’s Kurdish minority, is the director of 12 films, including documentaries and fictional works. He is serving a 1-year sentence in Evin Prison.

In October 2015, following an unfair trial before a Revolutionary Court in Tehran, he was sentenced to six years imprisonment for “insulting Islamic sanctities” and 223 lashes for “illicit relations falling short of adultery”. The former charge was imposed in connection with a music video the authorities had found on his hard drive; the latter for “shaking hands” and “being under one roof” with a female friend and poet “who had not covered her head and neck”. An appeal court upheld **Keywan Karimi’s** flogging sentence and ruled that he must serve one year of his 6-year prison sentence. The remaining five years were suspended, conditional on his “good behaviour”.

Keywan Karimi, who has been jailed since 23 November 2016, is in urgent need of specialized medical care. After multiple episodes of coughing up blood, doctors at Tehran’s Evin prison have said that he has bronchitis and a lung infection, and needs immediate medical treatment outside prison. Despite this, prison authorities have refused to transfer him to hospital.

Keywan Karimi is currently only receiving sedatives. He also suffers from a pre-existing bone condition called aneurysmal bone cyst (bloodfilled fibrous cysts that expand the bone and can cause pain, swelling and fractures), for which he needs specialized medical care.

The authorities have also told him that they intend to implement his flogging sentence of 223 lashes.

You can send Nowruz greetings for Keywan Karimi and/or his family via:

Iran Coordinator
Amnesty International
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Atena Daemi



Atena Daemi, a human rights defender and anti-death penalty campaigner, is serving a 7-year prison sentence in Evin Prison. She was violently arrested on 26 November 2016 when three Revolutionary Guard officials raided her parents' house. In a letter leaked from prison on 1 December, **Atena Daemi** said that she was beaten and pepper sprayed by the officials arresting her after she insisted peacefully that they present an arrest warrant. She has said that her sister was also punched in her

chest when she attempted to intervene to stop the officials. She also described how, on the way to prison, the Revolutionary Guard officials blindfolded her and repeatedly threatened her by saying that they would open new cases against her and had “cooked up a plan so that she gets the thought of ever getting released from prison out of her mind”.

Atena Daemi has been sentenced to seven years in prison for peacefully defending human rights, including through: writing posts on Facebook criticizing the authorities' execution record; painting anti-death penalty slogans on walls; distributing anti-death penalty leaflets; participating in a peaceful protest against the 2014 execution of a young Iranian woman named Reyhaneh Jabbari; visiting the gravesite of those killed during the protests following the 2009 presidential election; and sending information about abuses against political prisoners to human rights groups based outside of Iran. In the court verdict, these peaceful activities were cited as evidence of “gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security”, “spreading propaganda against the system” and “insulting the Supreme Leader”.

In her letter from prison, **Atena Daemi** writes: “*I, Atena Daemi, write from inside Evin Prison, the prison that has become the place of loving people for whom human beings and humanity are their sole concerns... My voice cannot be silenced by your cruel and unjust actions... Atena Daemi is one person but there are thousands of Atena Daemis outside prison who will raise their voice against the injustice [inflicted on] political prisoners.*”

You can send Nowruz greetings to Atena Daemi and/or her family via:

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1992 Yonge St. 3rd floor
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