

## **Table of Contents**

- ***Pastor Nadarkhani jailed again***
  - ***More Christians jailed in annual campaign of repression***
  - ***Iran: Timeline of religious intolerance events in 2012***
  - ***Bail for Iranian Christian arrested in Shiraz house Church raid***
  - ***Seven Christians detained following raid on prayer meeting***
  - ***Religion under attack: Iran frees imprisoned Christian, but arrests his lawyer Eric Schulzke***
  - ***UN experts' concern for religious minorities in Iran***
  - ***Pastor Nadarkhani released, acquitted of apostasy***
  - ***Christian pastor on death row to be re-tried***
  - ***Church in Tehran forced to close by Iran's Revolutionary Guard***
  - ***Iran steps up crackdown on Christians***
  - ***Iranian officials heighten control on Farsi-speaking Church***
  - ***Lawyer of Iranian pastor on death row faces prison***
  - ***Crackdown hits official Churches***
  - ***Iran denies Christian pastor faces execution and restates 'faith-based' charges***
  - ***Iranian authorities raid house church in Shiraz***
  - ***Rumors of imminent execution of Iranian pastor unconfirmed***
  - ***Churches forced to stop Farsi worship in Tehran***
  - ***Iranian authorities raid house church in Shiraz***
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## **Pastor Nadarkhani jailed again**

CSW (25.12.2012) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has been informed that Yousef Nadarkhani, the Church of Iran pastor recently acquitted of apostasy, has been returned to jail on an earlier charge.

In September, a court acquitted Pastor Nadarkhani of apostasy, but sentenced him to three years for evangelising Muslims. Since he had already spent close to three years in Lakan Prison in Rasht, the pastor was released after posting bail.

However, CSW sources now report that Pastor Nadarkhani has been returned to jail on the orders of the director of Lakan Prison, who claimed he had been released several days too early due to the insistence of his lawyer, Mohammed Ali Dadkhah. The pastor has now been returned to prison to serve the remainder of this time and to complete paperwork that allegedly had not been completed during his release in September.

In November, Pastor Nadarkhani was a special guest at CSW's National Conference in London, where he thanked all who had prayed and petitioned for him during his initial incarceration.

Mervyn Thomas, CSW's Chief Executive said: "We are disappointed to hear Pastor Nadarkhani has been returned to prison in such an irregular manner. The timing is insensitive and especially sad for his wife and sons, who must have been looking forward to celebrating Christmas with him for the first time in three years. We hope that Pastor Nadarkhani will be released without delay once this alleged sentence has been fully served. We are also asking for prayers for the pastor's safety, and for his family at this difficult time."

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## **More Christians jailed in annual campaign of repression**

CSW (20.12.2012) - Two Christians from the Church of Iran denomination, Behzad Taalipasand and Mohammadreza (Johann) Omid, were detained this morning in the northern city of Rasht. The arrests are the latest developments in a December crackdown on house churches by the Iranian government.

In an annual ritual ironically referred to by local Christians as a "Christmas gift", the Iranian regime generally intensifies its campaign of repression during the Christmas season. In 2011, 70 Christians were arrested during this period, while in 2010, the authorities in the southern city of Ahwaz aided and detained an entire Assemblies of God (AoG) congregation, including the Sunday school children.

This year has been no exception. On 25 December Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani of the Church of Iran, acquitted of apostasy in September, was jailed again in Rasht at the instigation of prison authorities to serve the remaining 45 days of a three year sentence for evangelizing Muslims.

Then on 27 December, around 50 Christians were arrested at a residential home in Tehran where they had gathered to celebrate Christmas. According to reports received by Iranian news agency Mohabat News, the majority were released after being interrogated and handing over mobile phones, full contact details and passwords to emails and social networking sites. However, 60-year old Reverend Vruir Avanesian was detained in Evin Prison, despite suffering severe health challenges. The reverend has since been escorted by guards to a specialist clinic for compulsory dialysis treatment, where he was briefly visited by his wife before being returned to prison.

Also in December, news emerged of the imprisonment without charge since September of the Reverend Saeed Abedini, a 32-year-old dual Iranian and American citizen, who was detained while visiting his parents. According to reports the Reverend has been given several dates for a court hearing, which has been repeatedly postponed.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) said: "The Iranian government's annual campaign of arrest and harassment during a significant religious holiday is wholly unacceptable. As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Iran is obligated to uphold freedom of religion or belief for all of its citizens, and this must include the right to observe days of worship and manifest their belief in communion with others. Moreover, while it is good that Reverend Avanesian is being allowed to receive necessary medical treatment, CSW condemns his arrest and question Iran's continuing unwillingness or inability to provide adequate medical attention for Pastor Benham Irani, whose health continues to deteriorate in prison. It is vital that the Iranian government ends the harassment of religious minorities within its borders, respects their right to religious freedom, and releases immediately and unconditionally all who have been imprisoned on account of their faith."

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# **Iran: Timeline of religious intolerance events in 2012**

***By Jordan McMurtrey for Human Rights Without Frontiers***

## **8 February**

In Tehran, authorities arrested the pastor of Narmak Assemblies of God Church. He was released on bail on Feb. 16. Sources reported that his arrest was part of a government targeting of government-sanctioned, evangelical denominations.

## **10 February**

Iranian authorities arrested Christian converts from Islam while they were meeting for worship at a home in the southern city of Shiraz. Officials held the Christians at an unknown location. The number of the arrested Christians, who belong to one of Iran's many underground house churches, is guessed to be between six and 10.

## **10 February**

Iran's Ministry of Intelligence ordered the last two officially registered churches holding Friday Farsi-language services in Tehran to discontinue them.

## **21 February**

In Kermanshah, authorities raided a house church, arresting 13 Christians who had gathered to worship. Authorities verbally and physically abused them during the arrest. Of those arrested, most were released the next day, and only three remain in prison.

## **22 February**

Authorities arrested leaders and members of churches meeting in buildings, as well as some from underground churches. The targeted arrests started when intelligence officers arrested approximately seven Christians at their homes between 6 a.m. and 7 a.m. Authorities raided their homes and confiscated valuables, including Bibles, computers, identification and other documents, and in one case even pictures decorating walls.

## **2 March**

Authorities arrested another convert in Isfahan, Fariborz Parsi-Nejad.

## **6 May**

Leaders of the Assemblies of God's (AOG) Central Church of Tehran told their congregation that authorities have demanded a list of names and identification numbers of church members, a major risk to converts from Islam.

## **8 June**

An Assemblies of God (AOG) affiliated church in the Janat-Abad area of west Tehran was ordered to close by the Intelligence Branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. The church's pastor was told to cancel all church activities and seal its property.

## **17 August**

Yousef Nadarkhani, a Christian pastor accused of apostasy will be put on a new trial on August 27. Naderkhani, who refused to repent from being a Christian in earlier judicial proceedings and faces a death sentence, was now facing the new charges of "banditry and extortion."

### **8 September**

Yousef Nadarkhani, the Church of Iran pastor sentenced to death for apostasy, was released and is at home with his family. During the court proceedings, Pastor Nadarkhani was acquitted of apostasy, but found guilty of evangelizing Muslims. He was sentenced to three years imprisonment for the latter charge, but released because he had already served this time.

### **5 October**

The human rights attorney who represented Yousef Nadarkhani was thrown into prison for representing unpopular clients, according to the American Center for Law and Justice.

### **12 October**

Seven Christians from the Church of Iran denomination were detained following a raid by members of the security services on a house in the city of Shiraz in Fars Province.

### **1 November**

Roxana Furughi, one of seven Christians from the Church of Iran denomination who were arrested following a raid on a house church in Shiraz on 12 October, was released after posting bail amounting to US\$25,000

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## **Bail for Iranian Christian arrested in Shiraz house church raid**

CSW (02.11.2012) - Roxana Furughi, one of seven Christians from the Church of Iran denomination who were arrested following a [raid on a house church](#) in Shiraz on 12 October, was released on 1 November after posting bail amounting to US\$25,000.

Another member of the group, Bijan Haghighi, was released on 25 October after posting bail of a similar amount. Meanwhile, Afshar Bahmani, one of two members of the house church who were [arrested on 18 October](#) after being summoned to Plaque 100, the Intelligence Ministry's detention centre, was released 24 hours after her arrest, apparently on health grounds. Six members of house church remain in prison.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has received recent reports of a sharp upsurge in the harassment and persecution of Christians in Iran, particularly converts, as part of what appears to be a concerted campaign targeting Christians of all denominations.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "We welcome the release of Roxana Furughi, Bijan Haghighi and Afshar Bahmani. However their detention for simply manifesting their faith in communion with others infringes on their religious freedom and contravenes the international covenants to which Iran is a signatory, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Moreover, the highly irregular demand of exorbitant bail amounts to secure the release of detained Christians

leaves prisoners and their families in uncertainty and financial insecurity. We call on the Iranian authorities to end this practice and to release without conditions or delay all who have been detained on account of their faith."

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## **Seven Christians detained following raid on prayer meeting**

CSW (12.10.2012) - Seven Christians from the Church of Iran denomination were detained today following a raid by members of the security services on a house in the city of Shiraz in Fars Province.

Mohammad (Vahid) Roghangir, Suroush Saraie, Roxana Foroughi, Eskandar Rezaie, Bijan Haghighi, Mehdi Ameruni and Shahin Lahooti are currently being held in Plaque 100, the Intelligence Ministry's notorious detention centre. They were detained at around 6pm, after security forces raided a house where a prayer meeting was underway.

According to sources close to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), older people who had attended the prayer gathering were threatened, but were not taken into custody. The detentions are part of a marked upsurge in a campaign of harassment of Christians of all denominations, with reports of a significant increase in arrests during recent weeks.

In other developments, on Wednesday, Mohabat News Agency reported that five Christian converts detained in Adel-Abad prison eight months ago following a raid on a house church in Shiraz have been informed they will face trial on 15 October. Since their arrests, the five have reportedly been confined in cells housing dangerous criminals and are charged with "creating illegal groups", "participating in a house church service", "propagation against the Islamic regime" and "defaming Islamic holy figures through Christian evangelizing". Yesterday, seven Christians who were jailed in Rasht six years ago received suspended five year sentences for "action against the national security."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is deeply concerned at news of yet another increase in the harassment of Iranian Christians. We particularly deplore the nature of the charges that are currently being levelled against Christians and other religious minorities. There appears to be an increasing tendency by the Iranian authorities to characterise legitimate religious activities as crimes against the state. In reality, people are being harassed merely on account of their faith. The ongoing harassment and imprisonment of Christians, Baha'is and other religious minorities contravenes international covenants to which Iran is a signatory, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees the right to freedom of religion. By arresting Christians who have peaceably gathered to pray or worship, Iran is violating their right to manifest their religious belief. We urge the Iranian government to end the harassment of religious minorities within its borders, to respect their right to freedom of religion, and to release all who have been held on account of their faith immediately and unconditionally."

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## **Religion under attack: Iran frees imprisoned Christian, but arrests his lawyer Eric Schulzke**

Deseret News (05.10.2012) - The sigh of relief felt several weeks ago when Iran decided not to execute a Christian pastor for converting from Islam was cut short when the

human rights attorney who represented him was thrown into prison for representing unpopular clients, according to the American Center for Law and Justice.

He had earlier been sentenced to nine years in prison and a 10-year suspension of his law license, but had successfully negotiated his way out of that sentence. It appears that Iran reneged on their agreement once international was diverted after his Christian client gained a reprieve from the death penalty.

"Sources close to the situation informed us over the weekend that Dadkhah has been detained and forced to begin serving this lengthy prison sentence in one of Iran's most notorious prisons. He is currently incarcerated in ward 350 of Evin prison, a ward reserved for political prisoners, in a cell with 22 other prisoners," ACLJ reported.

The move was also noted and decried by Amnesty International. "What hope do those arrested in Iran for peacefully expressing their views have that their rights will be respected when so many human rights defenders have been put behind bars or driven from the country for trying to defend others in a similar situation?" asked Amnesty's Ann Harrison.

This move is part of a larger crackdown on human rights activists, the New York Times reported: "The pattern included the arrest in the past 10 days of two children of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president of Iran, whose relations with Iran's current leadership have been strained. On Sept. 22, his daughter Faezemi Rafsanjani, a former member of Parliament, began serving a six-month jail sentence that Mr. Colville said was apparently linked to her participation in an opposition rally in February 2011. Mr. Rafsanjani's son Mehdi Rafsanjani was detained at the Tehran airport two days later as he returned from three years in exile to face charges linked to his role in mass protests over the outcome of the 2009 presidential election."

David French argues at National Review such suppression of Muslim human rights activists is especially troubling because it tends to short circuit the moderate reform that is desperately needed.

"As we see the Middle East burn (once again) with jihadist rage, Americans rightly ask, 'Where are the Islamic defenders of liberty?' The answer - sadly - is often 'in jail' or 'dead.' In Iraq I saw al-Qaeda's awful retribution against anyone who dared question their rule, and in Iran we see the regime's response to those courageous Muslims who defend the most basic human rights," French wrote.

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## **UN experts' concern for religious minorities in Iran**

Baha'i World News Service (23.09.2012) - Two United Nations Special Rapporteurs have expressed their deep concern at the situation of minority religions in Iran.

The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, has joined with the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, to call for a "thorough and independent review" of "all cases against individuals arrested and prosecuted on charges related to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion and belief."

"No individual should be arrested for peacefully exercising the rights to freedom of religion and belief, expression and association," they said.

Dr. Shaheed stressed that the arrest and prosecution of individuals for religious affiliation runs counter to the protection of minority religions in Iran's Constitution and represents a violation of the country's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Iran ratified in 1975.

The Special Rapporteurs welcomed the recent release of Christian Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, who had received the death sentence on a charge of apostasy. The experts highlighted however the arrest and detention of hundreds of Christians over the past few years and called on the Iranian authorities to "ease the current climate of fear in which many churches operate..."

"Iran possesses the basic legal framework to guarantee Christians, as a group, the right to freedom of religion, and should ensure that this right is granted in practice as well," said Dr. Bielefeldt, who noted that "the right to conversion in this context is an inseparable part of freedom of religion or belief..."

He also called for the protection of Baha'is and other religious minorities who are not recognised in Iran's Constitution. The cases of 495 Baha'is are still active with Iranian authorities, with some 111 Baha'is currently serving prison sentences.

The conviction of apostasy and death sentence for Pastor Nadarkhani – who was born to Muslim parents but converted to Christianity at the age of 19 – sparked strong condemnation from governments, organizations and religious leaders around the world. In October 2011, the Baha'i International Community issued a statement in his support describing the sentence as "reprehensible" and "a violation of every legal, moral, spiritual and humanitarian standard." Earlier this month, Pastor Nadarkhani's charge was reduced to "evangelizing Muslims," and his sentence to three years, which he was credited with having already served.

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## **Pastor Nadarkhani released, acquitted of apostasy**

CSW (08.09.2012) - CSW has been informed that Yousef Nadarkhani, the Church of Iran pastor sentenced to death for apostasy, has been released and is at home with his family.

According to reliable sources, during court proceedings that took place today, Pastor Nadarkhani was acquitted of apostasy, but found guilty of evangelizing Muslims. He was sentenced to three years imprisonment for the latter charge, but released because he had already served this time.

Pastor Nadarkhani was arrested in his home city of Rasht in 2009 soon after questioning the Muslim monopoly of religious instruction for children, which he felt was unconstitutional. He was sentenced to death for apostasy in 2010, a decision that was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2011. Although the Iranian penal code did not specify death for apostasy, a constitutional loophole allowed judges to refer to Shari'a law and authoritative fatwas to justify such a sentence. Today the pastor had been expected to face new charges for unspecified crimes, but was instead released.

CSW's Chief Executive, Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW is delighted to learn of Pastor Nadarkhani's release after a long incarceration. We commend the Iranian judiciary for this step, which is a triumph for justice and the rule of law. While we rejoice at this wonderful news, we do not forget hundreds of others who are harassed or unjustly detained on account of their faith, and CSW is committed to continue campaigning until

all of Iran's religious minorities are able to enjoy religious freedom as guaranteed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is party."

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## **Christian pastor on death row to be re-tried**

### ***Youcef Nadarkhani: Prisoner of the day***

ICHRI (17.08.2012) - Youcef Nadarkhani, a Christian pastor accused of apostasy will be put on a new trial on August 27. Nadarkhani, who refused to repent from being a Christian in earlier judicial proceedings and faces a death sentence, is now facing the new charges of "banditry and extortion."

The Christian pastor's earlier charges were "apostasy" and "converting to Christianity," but the new charges of "banditry and extortion" were first mentioned last year on Fars News Agency. A source close to the case of Youcef Naderkhani who wishes to remain anonymous on security grounds told the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran that, "Mr. Naderkhani's 'banditry' charges are fundamentally meaningless; he is not a thief or a bandit. This is a new accusation leveled against him for unknown reasons."

Youcef Naderkhani, 33, was born to Muslim parents and converted to Christianity at the age of 19. Prior to his arrest, he led a congregation of about 400 Christians in the Northern city of Rasht. Nadarkhani's death sentence on charges of apostasy was upheld by Branch 11 of Gilan Province's Appeals Court on August 23, 2010. On June 28, 2011, Iran's Supreme Court overturned the ruling, but made the decision conditional on Naderkhani's repentance. There were three court sessions between September 25 and September 28, 2011 in which Youcef Naderkhani was asked to repent and he refused. Nadarkhani is currently in detention inside Rasht Prison.

On September 30, 2011, the charge of "extortion" was mentioned for the first time on Fars News Agency's website in a news article about Nadarkhani. The article claimed that Youcef Naderkhani is accused of rape and repeated extortion. "Youcef Naderkhani has [committed] security crimes and had set up a house of corruption. This individual is a criminal and his crime is not inviting some to the religion of Christianity, but he has security crimes. Nadarkhani's death sentence has been issued for security crimes," Fars quoted Gholamali Rezvani, Deputy Governor of Gilan for Security.

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## **Church in Tehran forced to close by Iran's Revolutionary Guard**

CSW (08.06.2012) - An Assemblies of God (AOG) affiliated church in the Janat-Abad area of west Tehran has been ordered to close by the Intelligence Branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

According to local sources, the church's pastor was told to cancel all church activities and seal its property. Unless this decision is reversed, there will not be any church service this Sunday or for the subsequent future.

The use of the Revolutionary Guard (*Sepah*) to enforce the closure of the church is a worrying development. The Revolutionary Guard is known for using aggressive methods and is usually deployed in situations that are deemed to threaten the national security or



stability of the country. Furthermore, they are one of three intelligence organisations in Iran with similar powers to that of the Ministry of Intelligence (*ete/a'aat*).

Sources close to CSW have informed the organisation that all Farsi speaking churches in Tehran have been threatened with closure as authorities seek to eliminate various churches. One source close to CSW said: "If this aggressive campaign to eliminate evangelical Christianity is not stopped, it is a matter of time before all Farsi-speaking churches are forced to shut down".

The closure of the west Tehran church is the latest move in a crackdown that has increasingly targeted government-sanctioned churches since the end of 2011, when an AOG church in Ahwaz was raided and all attending were detained, including Sunday School children. This year, the leaders of the Anglican Churches of St Paul's and St Peter's in Esfahan have been detained. The head of St Paul's Church was temporarily released in May on bail of around \$40,000. On Sunday 6 May, the leaders of the AOG Central Church in Tehran announced that the Iranian Intelligence Ministry was demanding intrusive information on members of the congregation, including identity card numbers. More recently, members of Emmanuel Presbyterian Church in Tehran were detained, and the church was ordered to cease all weekly activities with the exception of its Sunday services.

Iran has also seen an upsurge in the harassment, arrests, trials and imprisonments of converts to Christianity since the beginning of 2012, particularly in Tehran, Kermanshah, Esfahan and Shiraz.

CSW's Advocacy Director, Andrew Johnston, said: "Whilst we have long been aware that churches in Iran are facing increasing harassment by the authorities, the closing down of the AOG associated church in west Tehran by the intelligence arm of the Revolutionary Guard, marks a particular escalation. This not only underlines Iran's continuing campaign to depict legitimate Christian activity as a danger to the state, but also sets a dangerous precedent by providing a blueprint for further church closures by the regime. CSW is calling for the immediate re-opening of this church and urges Iran, as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights, to fulfill its obligations and ensure religious freedom in its fullest sense for Christians and other religious minorities in the country."

**For further information or to arrange interviews please contact Matthew Jones, Public Affairs Officer at Christian Solidarity Worldwide, on +44 20 8329 0063, email [matthewjones@csw.org.uk](mailto:matthewjones@csw.org.uk) or visit [www.csw.org.uk](http://www.csw.org.uk).**

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## **Iran steps up crackdown on Christians**

***Revolutionary Guard Corps takes charge of campaign, closing down Tehran church.***

By Benjamin Weinthal

Jerusalem Post (12.06.2012) – Iran's stepped up its crackdown on the country struggling Christian community by closing a church in Tehran, prompting an Iranian human rights group and religious freedom experts to slam the regime.

"The ability to join a church or mosque or temple is one of the most fundamental religious freedoms," Hadi Ghaemi, a spokesman for the group International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, said last week.

"This drive to close churches is an assault on free religious practice, in violation of Iran's international commitments, and a sign of growing religious intolerance within the Iranian government."

According to the human rights group, Iranian Christians are in a dire situation because the regime assigned the Revolutionary Guard Corps to handle the "oversight of Christian churches in Iran, which were previously overseen by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance."

The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran noted, "At the end of May 2012, Iranian authorities forced the Assembly of God Church in the western Tehran neighbourhood of Jannat Abad to close its doors and discontinue services, a local source with knowledge of the Iranian Protestant community told the campaign."

A source told quoted the Iran's authorities as saying, "You must close the church, and if you don't do this and we have to formally close the church, then there is no hope of you even keeping the building afterwards to sell," .

In an email to The Jerusalem Post on Sunday, Jordan Sekulow, executive director of the American Center for Law & Justice, wrote, "Iran's latest assault on the religious freedom of Christians is disturbing, yet not surprising. Iran has consistently shown that it has no respect for international human rights and religious freedom. In fact, Iran is one of the world's worst offenders.

Those who embrace Christianity do so at great risk and are frequently targeted for persecution – including death because of their religious beliefs."

The American Center for Law & Justice is a US-based organization that defends religious freedom in the United States and abroad.

Dr. Richard Landes, an associate professor of history and director and cofounder of the Center of Millennial Studies at Boston University, told the Post via email, "On one level, the closure reveals the insecurity of the Muslims who carry it out, re-emphasizing (if that were necessary) the profound lack of confidence that Islamists in power have in a free market of ideas. And of course, this affects not only the specific church, but any kind of dissident, infidel or Muslim. This is classic pre-modern political behavior."

Landes, who has delivered talks about the persecution of Christians in the Middle East, added, "In a larger sense, this raises the issue of reciprocity.

At a time when Muslim spokesmen and women make strong demands to be treated by the highest standards of 'human rights' in the West, neither these Muslim spokespeople, nor those who trust them in the West, demand any kind of reciprocal restraint from Muslims in Islamic countries: 'Who are we to judge?'" "This failure might seem to the human rights activists who look the other way as a sign of generosity towards a morally challenged part of the world from whom we cannot expect anything like reciprocity, but it seems to 'them' as a sign of our moral cowardice, that we proleptically accept the dhimma [the inferior status of non- Muslims in a Muslim state]," he continued.

Nasrin Amirsedghi, a leading German-Iranian intellectual who has written extensively about human rights violations in the Islamic Republic, told the Post that "the systematic and state-sponsored persecution of Christians in Iran, particularly in the recent period, is

a sign of an increasingly weakened regime leadership. Wherever there is a fear of losing legitimacy, the regime employs violence and repression.”

She noted that Iran’s parliament voted 196 to 7 for the death penalty in 2008 to be imposed on apostates, such as those who convert from Islam to Christianity.

Sekulow, from the Center for Law & Justice, said, “Christian Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani is a perfect example of the persecution of Christians by Iran and its leadership. Pastor Youcef is fast approaching 1,000 days in captivity inside Iran – and a death sentence – because of his Christian beliefs. In our work in the United States and abroad to call attention to the plight of Pastor Youcef, we have seen a tremendous outcry from around the globe – support for Pastor Youcef and condemnation of Iran. Our global Tweet for Youcef campaign reaches nearly 2.5 million Twitter accounts daily in more than 200 countries around the world.”

Asked what the West can do regarding human rights violations in Iran, Sekulow said, “There are several areas of involvement where the West can make a difference. We have a duty to report on and work for the release of those persecuted, imprisoned and even facing death by execution because of their religious beliefs. As a free people, it is our job to take every bit of information we can obtain and utilize it in a way that can best assist those who too often are forgotten.”

He continued, “It is important that these crimes be publicized – that a media spotlight exposes these tragic events – to let Iran know that the world is watching.”

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## **Iranian officials heighten control on Farsi-speaking Church**

### ***AOG church in Tehran faces pressure to identify members to authorities***

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (11.05.2012) – Leaders of the Assemblies of God’s (AOG) Central Church of Tehran told their congregation on Sunday (May 6) that authorities have demanded a list of names and identification numbers of church members, a major risk to converts from Islam.

Church leaders then asked members in attendance to volunteer their information. The AOG church holds two Sunday services, both conducted in Farsi. It is the only church remaining in Tehran that offers Farsi-language worship on Sundays.

“This [government move] is basically to make sure the church is not taking in new members and to make it difficult and risky for non-Christians to attend,” Monsour Borji, an Iranian Christian and advocacy officer for rights initiative Article 18, told Compass. “It is an effort to limit the church, basically.”

Article 18 is a London-based initiative of the United Council of Iranian Churches (Hamgaam), which seeks to defend and promote religious freedoms in Iran. Hamgaam is composed of Iranian Christian churches in Europe.

The result of the most recent demand, according to Borji, is that as members of the Central AOG church consider whether they are willing to turn over their names and identification numbers, some are faced with the ethical dilemma of whether they would be denying Christ by declining to reveal themselves in this way.

"It has created an ethical dilemma for some church members who are not sure what to do, because giving their information feels suicidal," Borji said.

The announcement indicates an intensification of government efforts to control official churches in Iran that meet in church buildings. The Central Church of Tehran was forced to shut down its Friday Farsi-speaking services in 2009. Since then the number of Christians at Sunday services has significantly increased, according to sources.

In February, authorities also forced the last two official churches offering Friday Farsi-speaking services, Emmanuel Protestant Church and St. Peter's Evangelical Church, to discontinue Friday services.

Sources told Compass that if authorities have a list of the members of the AOG church, in essence they will be able to control and follow church members and also monitor if the church has been taking in new converts from Islam, which authorities have forbidden.

"For a long time there has been surveillance, but this new requirement is another sign that they are seeking to control and limit attendance of those who come from non-Christian backgrounds and to keep the Muslims away," said an expert on the region who requested anonymity.

Borji said that authorities have exercised aggressive pressure on the Central AOG church, and their newest tactics aim also to limit the number of public meetings. Church leaders and their families are under constant watch, and occasionally members are summoned for interrogation. Authorities have also "cut the supply line" for church members by restricting the publication of Christian materials, including Bibles, Borji said.

The church is regularly monitored by authorities, who 20 years ago had also demanded a list of all Christians in regular attendance, though church leaders refused. There are no baptisms taking place at the Central AOG church, nor at other official churches.

"It is a meticulous and organized effort to make sure nothing in the church goes unnoticed," Borji said. "The leaders are under a lot of pressure."

As an Islamic republic, Iran views Christians and especially Christian converts as enemies of the state and pawns of the West out to undermine the government. Borji explained that the Iranian government has never come to accept the concept of "Farsi-speaking church," and that authorities associate Christianity with some ethnic minorities in Iran – that is, Armenians and Assyrians – and the West.

"So accepting the notion of a church that worships in Farsi is a threat to a regime that demands religious monopoly," Borji said.

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## **Lawyer of Iranian pastor on death row faces prison**

***Court upholds prison sentence, ban on law practice***

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (08.05.2012) – The main defense lawyer for Iranian pastor Yousef Nadarkhani, who is appealing a death sentence, may be facing imminent imprisonment for defending the rights of Iranians, according to Amnesty International.

Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, a prominent human rights activist, had been sentenced in July to a nine-year prison sentence and a 10-year ban on legal practice and teaching, and he learned on April 28 that an appeals court had upheld the sentence. Charges against him included "membership of an association seeking the soft overthrow of the government" and "spreading propaganda against the system through interviews with foreign media," according to a press statement by Amnesty International.

At press time it was not known whether he had been detained, but he has reportedly said he expected to be imprisoned. Dadkhah is co-founder of Iran's Center for Human Rights Defenders (CHRD). The CHRD was forcibly closed in 2008, and though its members have continued to carry out their work, they have faced harassment from authorities and some of them are serving prison sentences in Tehran's Evin Prison. An expert on Iran who requested anonymity said that Dadkhah had been Nadarkhani's main lawyer, but that if he were imprisoned the effect on Nadarkhani's fate would be unclear.

"What is clear is that this development is not good news," the source said. "My sense is that the rule of law in Iran is abused, and the decisions of the Iranian courts are unpredictable and at the whim of the authorities. If Nadarkhani is hanged or released, it will not be primarily on the basis of the arguments of a good lawyer, but based on the whim of the authorities."

As an Islamic republic, Iran views Christians and especially Christian converts as enemies of the state and pawns of the West out to undermine the government. Most Christians who face charges are not able to afford legal defense. Those who can afford legal counsel have difficulty finding lawyers who are willing to defend them, because of how subversive Christianity is considered by the regime and the repercussions on lawyers.

"Many of the Christians who face court hearings do so without legal representation," the source said. "Simply by taking on a case of which the government disapproves, a case which challenges the government, would be high risk for a lawyer. Dadkhah's arrest has been coming for a long time, so it's not a surprise. The surprise is that he's been able to practice for such a long time."

In September 2010, Nadarkhani was sentenced to death after a court of appeals in Rasht, 243 kilometers (151 miles) northwest of Tehran, found him guilty of leaving Islam. He has been in prison since October 2009. At an appeal hearing in June, the Supreme Court of Iran upheld Nadarkhani's sentence but asked the court in Rasht to determine if he was a practicing Muslim before his conversion. The court declared that Nadarkhani was not a practicing Muslim before his conversion, but that he was still guilty of apostasy due to his Muslim ancestry. Nadarkhani's case had been sent to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei for a decision on his death sentence, but legally the lower court still has the authority to issue an execution order. Khamenei may or may not make a decision, and if the court were to issue an execution order, Khamenei would have the authority to block it. His case is essentially on hold.

In another significant case, the Iranian Revolutionary court sentenced Farshid Fathi, a Christian held in Tehran's Evin Prison since December 2010, to six years in prison, Mohabat News reported last month. Though his trial was in January, details of the proceedings were not available until recently. Fathi was arrested and tried for "action against the regime's security, being in contact with foreign organizations and religious propaganda," according to Mohabat News. Fathi's lawyer plans to appeal the case, Mohabat News reported. Married and the father of two young children, Fathi is held in Ward 350 of Evin Prison.

More Arrests, Releases Mohabat News reported on May 1 that several Christians who were arrested in Isfahan, south of Tehran, on Feb. 22 were released on bail, though the pastor of St. Paul Church of Isfahan, Hekmat Salimi, remains detained at Dastgerd

prison. On April 14, Iranian authorities simultaneously raided the homes of two Christian converts in the capital, Tehran, and arrested them.

Mohabat News identified the Christians only as Ladan N., 26, and Hooman H., 27. The two were reportedly held in Evin Prison, and though charges against them are unknown, authorities have sent their parents letters of summons to appear in court to answer questions about the converts' activities. When authorities arrested Ladan, her mother asked them where they were taking her daughter. One responded, "Ask Jesus Christ to come and release her," according to Mohabat News. Authorities confiscated many of her belongings, including her laptop, camera, books and photos.

Five Christians who were arrested on Feb. 8 in the southern city of Shiraz are still in prison at the Adel-Abad prison. The families of the five Christian converts have not been able to receive information about them and have been told that they could not be released on bail, according to Mohabat News. Their names are Fariba Nazemian, Mojtaba Hosseini, Homayoun Shokoohi, Mohamad-Reza Partoei and Vahid Hakkani. Three other Christians arrested from the same group on Feb. 8 in Shiraz were released on bail after 36 days in police custody. They are awaiting a court date, according to Mohabat News.

The five Christians who are still in prison have reportedly been interrogated by an assistant prosecutor of the Revolutionary Court of Shiraz, but charges against them are unknown. On April 11, Iranian authorities released Fariborz Arazm, 44, a Christian convert, from Evin Prison in Tehran. Arazm had been arrested at his residence in October in the area of Robat Karim, just south of Tehran. Authorities had ransacked Arazm's house, confiscating Bibles, photos, CDs and his computer hard-drive among other items, according to Mohabat News.

Authorities reportedly charged him with being in contact with missionaries and of promoting the Christian faith among Iranian Muslims. Arazm was held in Rajaei-Shahr prison in Karaj, where he was kept in solitary confinement for 21 days. He was later transferred to Evin's Ward 350 for further interrogation. Arazm was held in Evin for six months, according to Mohabat News.

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## **Crackdown hits official Churches**

### ***Authorities target Isfahan's Anglicans, as well as 'underground' Christians***

By Damaris Kremida

Compass Direct News (16.03.2012) – In a rare crackdown on a concentrated area, Iranian authorities have arrested Christians living in the country's third largest city in what is seen as a tactic to discourage Muslims and converts to Christianity from attending official churches.

Since last month officials have arrested about 12 Christian converts in Isfahan, 340 kilometers (211 miles) south of Tehran. Authorities have arrested leaders and members of churches meeting in buildings, as well as some from underground churches, according to Mohabat News.

The targeted arrests started on Feb. 22, when intelligence officers arrested approximately seven Christians at their homes between 6 a.m. and 7 a.m., Mohabat reported. Authorities raided their homes and confiscated valuables, including Bibles, computers, identification and other documents, and in one case even pictures decorating walls.

The Christian Iranian news service identified those detained on Feb. 22 as Hekmat Salimi, pastor of St. Paul Anglican Church, a convert of 30 years and author of theological books; Giti Hakimpour, 78, a female pastor at St. Luke's Anglican Church; Shahram Ghaedi, an actor; Maryam Del-Aram, 54; Shahnaz Zarifi, a mother of two; and Enayat Jafari.

Another Christian, Majid Enayat, was arrested on the same day at his workplace. He is a member of a house church, and Mohabat reported that prior to his arrest, authorities arrested other members of his group. Some of these Christians warned him that authorities intended to arrest him.

Of those arrested, Mohabat reported that authorities released Hakimpour on Feb. 25. Authorities have denied proper medical treatment to Del-Aram, who is under medical supervision. When her daughter tried to bring her medication to her at the prison, they refused it, according to Mohabat.

On March 2, authorities arrested another convert in Isfahan, Fariborz Parsi-Nejad.

Authorities have allegedly arrested more Christians in Isfahan, but sources have not been able to confirm the arrests and details. None of those arrested in Isfahan last month has been officially charged.

Though religious freedom monitors in Iran said it was not clear what triggered authorities to target Christians in Isfahan, one Iranian Christian outside the country said it may be yet another tactic to stop converts from attending Farsi-speaking meetings in official church buildings.

"I now have 12 names of Christians arrested in Isfahan," said the Iranian Christian, who requested anonymity. "Isfahan is a very Islamic city. We have two or three church buildings there. The government is very sensitive in Isfahan, which is the only city apart from Tehran with official church buildings. Now the government is focusing on the church buildings to scare the people so they don't go."

There are also a number of church buildings in various cities in Iran that are attended by ethnic Armenian Christians. The services are held in Armenian, and members have relatively more freedom to meet.

Earlier in February, authorities in Tehran ordered Emmanuel Protestant Church and St. Peter's Evangelical Church to discontinue their Farsi-language services. These were the last two official churches in the capital offering Farsi-language services on Fridays.

On Feb. 12, Noorallah Qabitzade was transferred to Dastgerd Prison in Isfahan. He was originally arrested in Dezful on Dec. 24, 2010, and this is the third time authorities have transferred him to a different prison because he is outspoken about his faith while incarcerated. His conditions in Isfahan were expected to be harsher, according to Mohabat.

### **Previous arrests**

Since the beginning of this year, authorities have arrested Christian converts in Tehran, Ahwaz, Shiraz, Isfahan and Kermanshah.

In Tehran, authorities on Feb. 8 arrested the pastor of Narmak Assemblies of God Church. He was released on bail on Feb. 16. Sources reported that his arrest was part of a government targeting of government-sanctioned, evangelical denominations.

In Kermanshah, authorities raided a house church on Feb. 21, arresting 13 Christians who had gathered to worship. Authorities verbally and physically abused them during the arrest, according to Mohabat. Of those arrested, most were released the next day, and now only three remain in prison.

But the Revolutionary Court of Kermanshah last month sentenced Masoud Delijani, a convert to Christianity arrested last year, to three years in prison on charges of being a Christian, holding illegal house church gatherings, evangelizing Muslims and action "against national security," according to Mohabat.

Arrested on March 17, 2011, Delijani suffered great mental and physical pressure while in prison, according to Mohabat. In July 2011 he was released on bail amounting to about US\$100,000 and rearrested two weeks later. Authorities did not give him due legal process, denying him legal defense, according to Mohabat.

In January 2010, officials had ordered the Pentecostal Church of Assyrians in Kermanshah to close on charges of spreading Christianity among Muslims.

Christians in Iran, most belonging to networks of house churches meeting in small groups in secret, are routinely arrested and interrogated. Iranian authorities view Christianity as a deviant anti-government movement and Christians as pawns of the West.

Iran is the fifth worst persecutor of Christians in the world, according to the most recent World Watch List by Christian support group Open Doors.

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## **Iran denies Christian pastor faces execution and restates 'faith-based' charges**

By Perry Chiaramonte

Fox News (13.03.2012) - Under fire from a United Nations Human Rights panel, a top Iranian official claims a Christian pastor insulted Islam but denies he faces execution.

The UN Human Rights Council met in Geneva Monday, where Ahmed Shaheed, a "special rapporteur for human rights in Iran" delivered a report on human rights abuses in Iran and called for the release of Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani. The pastor has been held in prison for nearly three years and was convicted on charges that Tehran has described in conflicting terms, first as apostasy and other faith-based crimes, then as rape and extortion.

Responding to Shaheed's presentation, Iranian human rights envoy Mohammad Javad Larijani denied that Nadarkhani faces the death penalty, though the sentence was spelled out in a ruling handed down by Iran's highest court last fall. Larijani also offered a new set of charges against Nadarkhani, including preaching to youth without their parents' permission, converting his home into a church and offending Islam.

"In the last 33 years after [the Islamic] revolution, no single person has been put to death or executed or pursued for changing his religion from Islam," he told the council. "Hundreds of people are changing from other religions to Islam. Why we should be so sensitive about a few people to change their religion from Islam?"



"Christianity and Judaism are preached in Iran," Larijani said. "We have a number of synagogues; we have a number of churches. But there is no need to humiliate, to offend Islam."

Jordan Sekulow, executive director of the American Center for Law and Justice, told FoxNews.com that it was noteworthy Larijani did not mention the rape and extortion charges that Tehran lodged against Nadarkhani amid mounting international pressure following his conviction for apostasy.

"He reads off the charges which are all faith-based, while denying that Nadarkhani received a death sentence for apostasy," Sekulow said. "They are admitting the pastor is being charged for his faith."

In recent months, there has been an increasing international outcry for Iran to release Nadarkhani. At the council session, representatives of the European Union expressed concern over numerous human rights violations and the pastor's case in particular. Representatives from Norway and Germany also have urged Iran to review Nadarkhani's case.

The vice president of Brazil, along with other governmental officials, is in direct talks with Larijani, demanding that Iran release Nadarkhani. Nadarkhani was arrested more than three years ago after voicing concern that his son was forced to participate in a class about the teachings of Islam. He was then found guilty of apostasy by a lower court in the Gilan province.

Nadarkhani was offered the chance to recant his Christian faith and return to Islam, but he refused. He was sentenced to death and has been held in captivity ever since.

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## **Iranian authorities raid house church in Shiraz**

Compass Direct News (12.02.2012) - Iranian authorities this week arrested Christian converts from Islam while they were meeting for worship at a home in the southern city of Shiraz, according to sources.

Officials are holding the Christians at an unknown location, they said.

The sources put the number of the arrested Christians, who belong to one of Iran's many underground house churches, at between six and 10. Authorities often detain, question and apply pressure on converts from Islam, viewing them as elements of Western propaganda set against the Iranian regime; as a result, the converts are forced to worship in secret.

The identity of only one of those arrested on Wednesday (Feb. 8), Mojtaba Hosseini, was known. Authorities arrested Hosseini in 2008 along with eight other Christian converts on charges of being Christians, according to Mohabat News.

"I guess they have been watching Hosseini since then," an Iranian Christian who requested anonymity told Compass.

Shiraz is not a particularly "religious" part of predominantly Shiite Islamic Iran, the Christian explained, but persecution against Christians in Iran stems from the government more than from local religious sentiment. The families of the victims have requested information about their whereabouts, but authorities have refused to provide it, according to Mohabat News.

In past years authorities have arrested Christians around Christmas time, and the Compass source said that the international community and media monitoring religious rights in Iran were expecting another crack-down last December. Instead, he said, the government was more cautious and arrested small groups over a wider period of time.

In December authorities arrested a group of Christian converts in the city of Ahwaz, about 874 kilometers (542 miles) southwest of Tehran in Khuzestan Province. Of those arrested, three Christians remain in prison: Pastor Farhad Sabokroh, Naser Zamen-Defzuli and Davoud Alijani. They are held in Ahwaz's Karoun Prison, according to Mohabat News.

Sources have expressed concern for Sabokroh's health. Prior to his arrest, which took place at his church's Christmas service on Dec. 23, Sabokroh underwent cataract surgery. In prison he does not have access to the medication he needs for his eyes. His wife visited him briefly on Jan. 27 and said she was concerned about his health, as he has lost a lot of weight, according to Mohabat News.

Authorities had also arrested Sabokroh's wife at the Christmas service and released her on Jan. 1 when she submitted the deed of a house as bail, according to Mohabat News. Christians are forced to put their homes up as bail in Iran, a practice that sources say is an extortion tactic to erode them of their finances and to better control them.

Authorities have not formally charged Sabokroh, Zamen-Defzuli and Alijani.

Noorollah Qabitzade, whom authorities arrested on Dec. 24, 2010, is also held at the Karoun prison in Ahwaz. Mohabat News reported that interrogators have put psychological pressure on Qabitzade in the last year and have forced him to sign statements in an effort to make him renounce his faith.

Farshid Fathi, who was arrested on Dec. 24, 2010 in Tehran, remains in the capital's notorious Evin prison. Sources said a court hearing had been scheduled this month but were unable to provide more information.

Iranian authorities continue to arrest and subject Christians to harsh treatment, but many of these cases remain unknown to the outside world. At the end of January, Mohabat News released information on the case of Leila Mohammadi, whom authorities had arrested in July last year.

She spent 74 days in solitary confinement at Tehran's Evin prison. On Jan. 18 a judge sentenced her to two years of prison for "collaborating with foreign-dependent groups, broad anti-Islamic propaganda, deceiving citizens by forming house churches, insulting sacred figures and acting against national security," according to Mohabat News.

Authorities released her on bail on Dec. 28, 2011, and her attorney has sent her case to Tehran Province's high court.

Iran applies sharia (Islamic law), which dictates that converts from Islam to other religions are "apostates" and thus punishable by death. Although judges rarely sentence Christians to death for leaving Islam, one Christian, Yousef (also spelled Youcef) Nadarkhani, is appealing such a decision in the northeastern city of Rasht.

Nadarkhani has been in prison since October 2009. A Rasht court found him guilty of leaving Islam and handed him the death sentence in September 2010.

Behnam Irani, who belongs to the same denomination as Nadarkhani, The Church of Iran, has been in prison in Karaj since May 2011; he turned himself in after authorities issued a warrant for his arrest, according to rights group Middle East Concern.

Irani was previously arrested in April 2010 and released on bail after a few months. In January 2011 a court found him guilty of "crimes against national security" and sentenced him to one year in prison. Authorities told him he must also serve a five-year sentence handed down in 2008.

Asked if there was a change in persecution trends from previous years, the Compass source said, "Nothing has changed, the issue is the same," explaining that the attitude of the government toward Christians remains hostile.

Authorities have prohibited musical worship and Bible distribution at the Central Church of Tehran, the largest and most visible Assemblies of God church in the country. Last December officials enforced a policy under which only invited guests could attend a Christmas service at the church, and in December 2009 the church succumbed to intense pressure by authorities to discontinue its Friday services, which had attracted the most converts to Christianity.

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## **Rumors of imminent execution of Iranian pastor unconfirmed**

***Lawyers await written confirmation that court issued execution order***

*By Damaris Kremida*

Compass Direct News (24.02.12) – Lawyers for an Iranian pastor awaiting a final decision on his death sentence have not received communication from authorities that their client will be executed, despite reports that his death is imminent.

Rumors of an imminent execution of Yousef Nadarkhani were leaked this week after a source close to one of his lawyers contacted international media, informing them that a lower court had signed Nadarkhani's execution papers and that his death sentence would be carried out soon, sources told Compass.

"The lawyer is waiting for confirmation, but he understood from a source that the execution was issued," said Firouz Khandjani, a member of the council of the Church of Iran, Nadarkhani's denomination. "Now we are trying to understand exactly what is happening. Because the information came from someone close to the lawyer, he took it seriously."

Nadarkhani's case had been sent to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei for a decision on his death sentence, but legally the lower court still has the authority to issue an execution order, Khandjani said. Khamenei may or may not make a decision, and if the court were to issue an execution order, Khamenei would have the authority to block it, Khandjani said.

Though Nadarkhani's lawyers have not received written confirmation of an execution order, Khandjani said he found it "worrying" that the government has repeatedly disregarded its own law and legal process in its treatment of Christians.

The Iranian government has executed prisoners without prior notice, sources told Compass, though it is not common.

"We are concerned for the safety of Christians in Iran, because the government is not respecting the law or the legal procedures," Khandjani said. "We are waiting for a confirmation, but we have to take action, because we know of people who were executed without notification."

Nadarkhani spoke to his wife as recently as Wednesday (Feb. 22), according to sources, and Jubilee Campaign reported that the American Center for Law and Justice had confirmed that he was still alive earlier today.

Some sources told Compass they are skeptical of the credibility of information that Nadarkhani's lawyers received and the certainty with which international press have been reporting his "imminent death." They say this may be a governmental ploy to gauge international reaction to such a rumor.

Christians in Iran are routinely arrested and interrogated. Most of them belong to networks of house churches meeting in small groups in secret.

In December the head of Iran's Judiciary, Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, reportedly ordered the presiding judge over the trial in Rasht to make no moves on Nadarkhani's case for one year.

In September 2010 Nadarkhani was sentenced to death after a court of appeals in Rasht, 243 kilometers (151 miles) northwest of Tehran, found him guilty of leaving Islam. He has been in prison since October 2009.

The court in Rasht was expected to pronounce a verdict on Nadarkhani's appeal in October 2011 but instead sent the Christian's case to the nation's Islamic authority, Khamenei.

At an appeal hearing in June, the Supreme Court of Iran upheld Nadarkhani's sentence but asked the court in Rasht to determine if he was a practicing Muslim before his conversion. The court declared that Nadarkhani was not a practicing Muslim before his conversion, but that he was still guilty of apostasy due to his Muslim ancestry.

The Supreme Court had also determined that his death sentence could be annulled if he recanted his faith. The Rasht court gave Nadarkhani three chances to recant Christianity in accordance with *sharia* (Islamic law), but Nadarkhani refused to do so. The Supreme Court in essence ruled that Nadarkhani could be executed if he did not recant.

"You have to consider that Nadarkhani has been condemned twice," Khandjani said. "One time by a local court, and then the Supreme Court confirmed the death sentence."

Authorities arrested Nadarkhani in his home city of Rasht in October 2009 on charges that he questioned obligatory religion classes in Iranian schools. After finding him guilty of apostasy, the court of appeals in Rasht in November 2010 issued a written confirmation of his charges and death sentence.

One of Nadarkhani's lawyers, Mohammad Ali Dadkhah, also faces charges for "actions and propaganda against the Islamic regime," due to his human rights activities.

Iranian authorities view Iranian Christians as pawns of the West trying to bring down the regime, sources said. As Christians in Iran are held hostage to the government's political whims, some Iranian Christians say the key to their freedom is continued pressure from the international community.

"We have to keep praying and sharing information about Christians in Iran, because this

is a difficult moment for the people of Iran," Khandjani said. "The minorities are particularly affected, but Iranians in general are under pressure from the government. Their freedoms are very restricted."

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## **Churches forced to stop Farsi worship in Tehran**

### ***Ministry of Intelligence issues halt to services, which attracted converts***

*By Damaris Kremida*

Compass Direct News (17.02.12) – Iran's Ministry of Intelligence has ordered the last two officially registered churches holding Friday Farsi-language services in Tehran to discontinue them.

Emmanuel Protestant Church and St. Peter's Evangelical Church were the last two official churches offering Farsi-language services on Fridays in Tehran, according to Middle East Concern (MEC). Officials issued the order on Feb. 10

Authorities had ordered the Central Church of Tehran to close its Friday Farsi services in December 2009. The Central Church, an Assemblies of God (AOG) congregation, had conducted multiple services on Fridays.

Friday services in Tehran attracted the city's converts to Christianity as well as Muslims interested in Christianity, as Friday is most Iranians' day off during the week. Authorities told the churches they can hold the services on Sunday, a working day when most Iranians are not able to attend.

"This decision means that there are now no Farsi-language services on Fridays in any officially registered church in Tehran," an MEC report issued this week stated.

Emmanuel and St. Peter's are Presbyterian churches, and, along with the Central Church, are among Tehran's few registered churches. They exist mainly to serve the Armenian and Assyrian communities. The three churches' Armenian- and Assyrian- language services are typically held on Sundays.

Because these churches belong to minority groups, government officials cannot stop them from operating but are doing what they can to limit them and the spread of Christianity to Farsi speakers, an Iranian Christian who requested anonymity told Compass.

"Authorities want church operations to stop, but because these churches are established by Armenians and Assyrians and their leaders are Armenian and Assyrian, they can't stop them," the source said, "but they can stop the Farsi-speaking services."

The source said that the newest restrictions have cut the two churches' attendance by half.

The MEC report stated that "the order to stop Farsi services is consistent with the authorities' policy of restricting Christian activities to these traditional communities," indicating that Tehran is determined to eradicate access to Christian worship for the country's growing number of Christian converts.

Authorities have prohibited musical worship and Bible distribution at the Central Church of Tehran, the largest and most visible AOG church in the country. Last December

officials enforced a policy under which only invited guests could attend a Christmas service at the church.

The Iranian Christian said authorities recently have pressured leaders of Emmanuel and St. Peter's churches to turn over to officials the national identity numbers of Christians. As a result, many Christians from these churches, as well as the Central Church of Tehran, have lost their jobs.

"We have some people who were fired from their jobs," the Christian said. "The authorities pushed the bosses to fire their Christian employees."

The source explained that this is a new tactic by the government to discourage Iranians from becoming Christians and to deter Christians from being involved in church.

"If I have too many difficulties in my life, I won't have time to be involved in church, and people will see how difficult it is to be a Christian," the source said. "This is not a good face for the Christians. The others see and say, 'Oh, they became Christians and God stopped His blessing to them.'"

Most Iranian Christian converts attend underground house churches that belong to various networks. For their own protection, these Christians often do not know about other house church networks.

Authorities often detain, question and apply pressure on converts from Islam, viewing them as elements of Western propaganda set against the Iranian regime; as a result, the converts are forced to worship in secret.

This week news surfaced of the arrest in Tehran of an AOG leader, Masis Moussian of the Narmak AOG church. Mohabat News reported that his arrest was a result of "waves of anti-Christian pressures and distribution of unsubstantiated reports by regime-supported media regarding the AOG churches of Iran." According to these reports, members of the AOG church in Tehran are "extreme Christians" trying to recruit new members and particularly youth across the country.

Moussian is held at the Rajaei-Shahr prison and is not allowed visitors. His family has not been able to obtain information on his condition in prison.

On Feb. 8 authorities also arrested about 10 Christians who had gathered for worship at a house in the southern city of Shiraz. A new report by Mohabat News revealed that authorities mistreated the Christians in attendance and searched the house, confiscating Bibles. The Christians still remain in an unknown location.

The new report identified two women, three men and a teenager by their first names. Another was identified as Mojtaba Hosseini. Authorities had also arrested Hosseini in 2008, along with eight other Christian converts, on charges of being Christians, according to Mohabat.

Among those arrested last week was a 17-year-old boy named Nima, along with his mother, Fariba, and father, Homayoun. Another woman was identified as Sharifeh, and two men were identified as Kourosh and Masoud. Authorities searched the homes of those arrested and seized CDs, Bibles, Christian materials, computers, fax machines and satellite receivers, according to Mohabat.

Iran applies *sharia* (Islamic law), which dictates that converts from Islam to other religions are "apostates" and thus punishable by death. Although judges rarely sentence Christians to death for leaving Islam, one Christian, Yousef (also spelled Youcef) Nadarkhani, is appealing such a decision in the northeastern city of Rasht.

Nadarkhani has been in prison since October 2009. A Rasht court found him guilty of leaving Islam and handed him the death sentence in September 2010. Remaining in prison also are Farshid Fathi in Tehran; Farhad Sabokroh, Naser Zamen-Defzuli, Davoud Alijani and Noorollah Qabitizade in Ahwaz; and Fariborz Arazm and Behnam Irani in Karaj.

There are an estimated 350,000 Christian converts from Islam in Iran.

"I believe 100 percent the whole movement in Iran is in God's hand," the source said. "This pushing [of the government] can stop the church buildings, but they cannot stop the Kingdom of God."

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## **Iranian authorities raid house church in Shiraz**

### ***As many as 10 Christians arrested without formal charges***

Compass Direct News (10.02.12) – Iranian authorities this week arrested Christian converts from Islam while they were meeting for worship at a home in the southern city of Shiraz, according to sources.

Officials are holding the Christians at an unknown location, they said.

The sources put the number of the arrested Christians, who belong to one of Iran's many underground house churches, at between six and 10. Authorities often detain, question and apply pressure on converts from Islam, viewing them as elements of Western propaganda set against the Iranian regime; as a result, the converts are forced to worship in secret.

The identity of only one of those arrested on Wednesday (Feb. 8), Mojtaba Hosseini, was known. Authorities arrested Hosseini in 2008 along with eight other Christian converts on charges of being Christians, according to Mohabat News.

"I guess they have been watching Hosseini since then," an Iranian Christian who requested anonymity told Compass.

Shiraz is not a particularly "religious" part of predominantly Shiite Islamic Iran, the Christian explained, but persecution against Christians in Iran stems from the government more than from local religious sentiment. The families of the victims have requested information about their whereabouts, but authorities have refused to provide it, according to Mohabat News.

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In December authorities arrested a group of Christian converts in the city of Ahwaz, about 874 kilometers (542 miles) southwest of Tehran in Khuzestan Province. Of those arrested, three Christians remain in prison: Pastor Farhad Sabokroh, Naser Zamen-Defzuli and Davoud Alijani. They are held in Ahwaz's Karoun Prison, according to Mohabat News.

Sources have expressed concern for Sabokroh's health. Prior to his arrest, which took place at his church's Christmas service on Dec. 23, Sabokroh underwent cataract surgery. In prison he does not have access to the medication he needs for his eyes. His wife visited him briefly on Jan. 27 and said she was concerned about his health, as he has lost a lot of weight, according to Mohabat News.

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Authorities have not formally charged Sabokroh, Zamen-Defzuli and Alijani.

Noorollah Qabitzade, whom authorities arrested on Dec. 24, 2010, is also held at the Karoun prison in Ahwaz. Mohabat News reported that interrogators have put psychological pressure on Qabitzade in the last year and have forced him to sign statements in an effort to make him renounce his faith.

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Iranian authorities continue to arrest and subject Christians to harsh treatment, but many of these cases remain unknown to the outside world. At the end of January, Mohabat News released information on the case of Leila Mohammadi, whom authorities had arrested in July last year.

She spent 74 days in solitary confinement at Tehran's Evin prison. On Jan. 18 a judge sentenced her to two years of prison for "collaborating with foreign-dependent groups, broad anti-Islamic propaganda, deceiving citizens by forming house churches, insulting sacred figures and acting against national security," according to Mohabat News.

Authorities released her on bail on Dec. 28, 2011, and her attorney has sent her case to Tehran Province's high court.

Iran applies *sharia* (Islamic law), which dictates that converts from Islam to other religions are "apostates" and thus punishable by death. Although judges rarely sentence Christians to death for leaving Islam, one Christian, Yousef (also spelled Youcef) Nadarkhani, is appealing such a decision in the northeastern city of Rasht.

Nadarkhani has been in prison since October 2009. A Rasht court found him guilty of leaving Islam and handed him the death sentence in September 2010.

Behnam Irani, who belongs to the same denomination as Nadarkhani, The Church of Iran, has been in prison in Karaj since May 2011; he turned himself in after authorities issued a warrant for his arrest, according to rights group Middle East Concern.

Irani was previously arrested in April 2010 and released on bail after a few months. In January 2011 a court found him guilty of "crimes against national security" and sentenced him to one year in prison. Authorities told him he must also serve a five-year sentence handed down in 2008.

Asked if there was a change in persecution trends from previous years, the Compass source said, "Nothing has changed, the issue is the same," explaining that the attitude of the government toward Christians remains hostile.

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Authorities have prohibited musical worship and Bible distribution at the Central Church of Tehran, the largest and most visible Assemblies of God church in the country. Last December officials enforced a policy under which only invited guests could attend a Christmas service at the church, and in December 2009 the church succumbed to intense pressure by authorities to discontinue its Friday services, which had attracted the most converts to Christianity.

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