



# Christians in Parliament All Party Parliamentary Group Report on the Persecution of Christians in Iran



## Letter from the Chairman

It has been a privilege to act as Chairman of the Christians in Parliament APPG Inquiry into the Persecution of Christians in Iran. Despite some of the difficulties we face in our own society, Christians in Britain have a great deal for which we can be thankful. The freedoms of belief, expression and association we currently enjoy in the UK are in stark contrast to the terrible persecution suffered by our fellow believers in Iran. Whilst we must always be on our guard that those historic liberties are not eroded in the UK, I also believe we have a fundamental duty to do all we can to advocate on behalf of those who are suffering extreme hardship for the sake of their Christian convictions.

I know that the other panel members will want to join me in expressing our sincere thanks to all those who gave evidence to the Inquiry. Some travelled many miles to speak to us. Others risked either personal reprisals or reprisals against their families because of their testimony, but put these considerations aside because of a determination that the outside world should not be left in the dark about the persecution visited on the Iranian Church. We thank each one for their honesty and openness in speaking about what were often difficult and painful experiences. We also wish to thank Jane Marriott, formerly Chargé d’Affaires and Deputy Ambassador at the British Embassy in Iran, and Sadeq Saba, Editor of BBC Persian, who gave up their time to speak to the Inquiry.

It has been a pleasure to work alongside a committed team of colleagues, drawn from across the political spectrum, who have taken a significant interest and involvement in this inquiry. Alongside the Westminster panel, which heard both live and recorded evidence, a further group made a visit to Turkey to meet with those who had fled Iran because of persecution. My thanks go to Baroness Berridge, Joe Benton MP, Fiona Bruce MP, Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson MP, John Glen MP, Lord Hylton, Nicky Morgan MP, Sarah Newton MP, Robert Flello MP,

Andrew Selous MP, Gavin Shuker MP and Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP.

I would like to express my particular appreciation to Elam Ministries, an organisation that has put in a lot of work behind the scenes to organise witnesses, conduct interviews in Turkey on our behalf, and more generally to make this inquiry possible. I am also grateful to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Middle East Concern and Open Doors for the detailed and thoroughly researched reports they submitted to the Inquiry. We commend each organisation for the support they offer to the persecuted Church and hope that they will be able to use this report to further their work.

Nobody who took part in or observed the Inquiry could fail to be touched by the dignity, warmth and positivity of the Iranian Christians, in spite of everything they have endured. It is my sincere wish that in detailing and cataloguing the abuses they face, and in making recommendations, this inquiry can contribute towards an international climate in which the Iranian regime would be forced to reconsider the way Christians are treated. In fact, our great desire is to see justice and fairness in the way the Iranian Government interacts with all those whose religious or political views differ from those of the regime.



**David Burrowes MP**  
Inquiry Chairman



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## 1. Executive summary

**1.1** The Christians in Parliament APPG Inquiry into the Persecution of Christians in Iran held four oral sessions in April and July 2012, and took testimony from 12 witnesses. There followed a research trip to Turkey, where many Christians have fled to escape from their homeland. Here delegates were able to interview a large number of witnesses who had experienced persecution by the Iranian regime. Delegates also met with representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR Turkey) in Ankara.

**1.2** The Inquiry heard that Iran has a long history of religious tolerance, and that tolerance for minority religions is explicit in Iran's constitution. Despite this, strong evidence was gathered of severe persecution perpetrated by the Iranian regime, predominantly (but not exclusively) focused on Evangelical churches that speak about their faith among Muslims and have members who are Christians from a Muslim background. Elam Ministries reports that eight church leaders have been killed by the Iranian regime solely on account of their Christian faith since 1979 and one narrowly escaped judicial execution in 2012. The organisation has confirmed reports that more than 300 Christians have been arrested and interrogated in at least 48 cities across Iran since summer 2010, but believes the full figure is almost certainly higher.

**1.3** The Inquiry heard evidence of the following forms of persecution by the Iranian Government directed towards Christians:

- Execution and extra-judicial killings of pastors, solely on account of their Christian faith
- Arbitrary arrest and imprisonment without charge or trial
- Beatings and torture, including physical and psychological torture
- Intimidation of individual Christians
- Repressions of churches

- Incommensurate bail demands
- Appropriation of property, including passports and personal identification documents
- Discrimination, particularly employment and education discrimination

**1.4** Witnesses explained that, because of the severity of the persecution they suffer, it has become too dangerous for most of the Evangelical churches to hold services in church buildings and so they have been driven "underground", meeting secretly in small groups in members' homes.

**1.5** In contrast to the persecution carried out by the Iranian Government, witnesses reported that Iranian people are generally accepting and positive towards their Christian neighbours and disillusioned by the regime. The Inquiry heard evidence that people are increasingly questioning the version of Islam propagated by the Government and many are therefore interested to hear about the Christian faith. According to witnesses, those who distribute Gospels in Iran report that it is unusual for a copy of the New Testament to be refused when offered to those from a Muslim background, and a very high proportion of people who accept one convert to Christianity.

**1.6** Several witnesses testified about their belief that the Iranian regime is not impervious to international opinion, and is concerned for its reputation among other nations. This view is confirmed by the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran: "My conviction is that Iran cares, especially about what is said by the outside world<sup>1</sup>."

**1.7** While the All Party Group recognises the current lack of diplomatic relations with Iran, the group would seek to highlight the real impact the British Government can have by publicly holding Iran to account for its human rights record in relation to

<sup>1</sup> [www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2011/111020\\_Iran.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2011/111020_Iran.doc.htm)



Christians and by supporting other governments and organisations in applying pressure to the Iranian regime. Specifically the panel makes the following recommendations:

#### **(1.7.1) Recommendation One**

**We ask the British Government to use appropriate channels to urge the Iranian regime to uphold its obligations according to its own constitution and under international law, including provisions for freedom of religion or belief contained within the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party.**

#### **(1.7.2) Recommendation Two**

**We note the significant role played by the British Government in promoting human rights. We ask that the British Government, as well as parliamentarians and NGOs, would engage with and encourage other governments, in Europe and worldwide, to speak out publicly against the persecution of Christians in Iran, as well as using any diplomatic ties to encourage the Iranian regime to uphold its obligations according to its own constitution and under international law, including provisions for freedom of religion or belief contained within the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.**

#### **(1.7.3) Recommendation Three**

**We ask the British Government to support all those who work for the release of people who are imprisoned in Iran because of their faith — including the Iranian pastor Farshid Fathi, who has been incarcerated since December 2010. We urge British Parliamentarians and journalists to use all means available to publicise the persecution of Christians in Iran.**

#### **(1.7.4) Recommendation Four**

**We call on the British Government to recognise that there is real evidence of persecution of Christians in Iran, and to ensure that the asylum system is fully aware of the situation for Christians in Iran when considering their applications for resettlement.**

#### **(1.7.5) Recommendation Five**

**We ask the British Government to work through European institutions to facilitate EU regulations that will ban signal-jamming on European-owned satellites.**

#### **(1.7.6) Recommendation Six**

**We ask the British Government to support UNHCR Turkey as it seeks the implementation of the proposed Law on Foreigners and International Protection by the Turkish Government, and to work with the Turkish Government to provide safe, humanitarian refuge for persecuted Christians both in Britain and in other parts of the world.**

#### **(1.7.7) Recommendation Seven**

**We urge the British Government to support the work of Dr Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran, in his mandate to monitor human rights, including religious freedom, in the country.**

## 2. Introduction

**2.1** Iran has a population of approximately 74 million, the vast majority of whom are Shi'ite Muslims. As this report will show, Christians in Iran face significant persecution; the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran estimates that 10,000 to 15,000 Christians emigrate from the country each year. The other significant minority groups in Iran include Jews, Baha'is, Sufi Muslims and Sunni Muslims, all of which report persecution and denial of basic human rights.

**2.2** The hardship faced by the churches in Iran dates back to shortly after the revolution of 1979. Initially the new Islamic regime was tolerant of Christians, but within a short space of time this tolerance evaporated and a campaign of persecution against the Church commenced.

**2.3** The Iranian constitution enshrines protection of freedom of religion for Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, and there is a system of registration for non-Muslim places of worship. In reality, however, even the officially recognised churches face severe limitations on their freedom to worship. With few exceptions, churches are no longer allowed to hold services in Farsi (the first language of most Iranian Christians) and are not allowed to hold services on Fridays (the Iranian weekend is on a Thursday and Friday). This generally means that if a Christian wants to attend worship in a recognised church on a Sunday they are forced to forgo a day of work, and a day's pay. Those Christians who do attend services are closely monitored by the Government, which routinely photographs Christians going into and out of services. Church leaders have been required to submit a list of their members with detailed personal information, including identity card numbers, so that church-goers can be easily traced. The official churches are also finding it increasingly difficult to

obtain permission to carry out maintenance work on their ancient buildings, the result being that significant architectural treasures are in danger of being lost to decay<sup>2</sup>. Since 1989 some Evangelical churches have lost their registration and have been disallowed from re-registering<sup>3</sup>.

**2.4** Sharing Christian faith with a Muslim is strictly forbidden and churches that reach out to non-Christians face severe pressure. From those churches that refuse to agree to strict bans on sharing their faith, some pastors and evangelists have been executed or assassinated, many Christians have been imprisoned and tortured, and congregations live under constant threat of arbitrary arrest and violent interrogation.

**2.5** Pre-revolution, Iran was seen as sympathetic towards religious minorities, and the Iranian constitution contains guarantees of fundamental human rights, including freedom of opinion, and protection from torture and arbitrary arrest. Article 23 of the Iranian constitution states that: "The investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief." However, these rights are subject to a more general principle that Shari'a law takes precedence in any conflict of law, and so these constitutional provisions have not stopped widespread interrogation and punishment of Iranians purely on the grounds of their religious beliefs.

**2.6** This persecution has resulted in the rapid growth of "underground" house churches, which try to operate in secret, away from the scrutiny of the Iranian Government. The NGO Middle East Concern (MEC) states in its evidence to the Inquiry: "MEC is aware through our networks that many

<sup>2</sup> "So with respect to Armenian churches, Christian churches, they barely allow some minor repairs. And I'm sure you know that in Kerman recently they destroyed one of our churches that had more than sixty years' history." – Eric Leon, 23 April 2012, Westminster hearings

<sup>3</sup> "From 1989 onwards, several evangelical churches lost their registration and were unable to re-register. As a consequence, those churches are not authorized to issue marriage or baptism certificates." Open Doors, written submission to the Inquiry



live in fear of the authorities. Iran's internal security and intelligence operations are renowned for their strength, and the Christian convert community is known to be under particular scrutiny. It is therefore not only those who make overt statements or publicly proclaim or propagate their faith who face intervention and sanction by the authorities. Most converts keep a low profile and yet perceive that they are under intense scrutiny. This perception seems justified. There are a number of ways in which the authorities are known to have become aware of Christian converts."

**2.7** The regime has retaliated with a concerted propaganda campaign, branding such groups as "sects" and spreading false information about their beliefs. President Ahmadinejad has made calls for the development of Christianity to end in Iran<sup>4</sup>. This harshness of the regime is in stark contrast to the warmth and tolerance of a large proportion of the Iranian people. Iranian culture is thoughtful and dignified and Iranians are understandably proud of their rich history of poetry and literature. The Iranian church is growing at an incredible rate, with a very high incidence of conversion among people who are given New Testaments. Iranian Christians report that the nation is disillusioned with the face of Islam that its Government presents and is thirsty for a genuine experience of God. Many of the witnesses at the Westminster hearings were at pains to stress that they were on good terms with their neighbours, and that the propaganda against Christians that is broadcast by the regime is, for the most part, not well received or widely believed.

**2.8** Recently there has been a marked escalation in persecution of Christians in Iran, particularly with reference to the regime's emerging practice of detaining members of house churches over the Christmas period each year. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), an NGO that monitors persecution of Christians, reports: "There has been a noticeable increase in the harassment, arrests, trials and imprisonments of converts to Christianity since the beginning of 2012 in various cities across Iran, with a particular crackdown on individuals and groups in Tehran, Kermanshah, Esfahan and Shiraz. Although some of these detainees have now been released after being asked to sign documents preventing them from attending Christian meetings, many others remain detained, including women and the elderly. There was a particular upsurge of arrests during February 2012, which continued into March. Once again, exorbitant bail payments have been demanded in order to secure temporary release for detained Christians."

**2.9** These occurrences have been covered in the British and worldwide press, and it is the stated belief of many of the witnesses who attended the hearings that the Iranian regime is concerned by its failing reputation internationally and that international press interest does have an impact for good in Iran.

*Iranian people are one of the most open people to the message of Christianity, so I didn't have any problems with the people, my friends in the university. Our neighbours loved and trusted us more than anybody else. And generally people of Iran are very open about Christianity... I have never heard or never seen one Iranian reject a Gospel when we were sharing our testimonies.*

**Catharine, 16 April 2012,  
Westminster hearings**

## 3. Objectives and Methodology

**3.1** The purpose of this inquiry and report is to investigate and catalogue instances of persecution of and discrimination against Christians in Iran, thereby creating an official British record of the Iranian Government's violation of the fundamental human rights of this religious minority. We aim to use this report, both in the UK and abroad, to raise awareness of the difficulties faced by the Iranian Church, and to make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and his Ministers of State about actions that the British Government could take to support suffering Christians in Iran.

**3.2** Evidence for the Inquiry was gathered from a number of sources:

### (3.2.1) Witness testimony

Initially, testimonies were heard over a series of three oral sessions in the Houses of Parliament (hereafter referred to as the Westminster hearings). Seven witnesses appeared before the Inquiry and gave evidence of their experiences; all of these were Iranian Christians who have been subject to discrimination or persecution in their home country. In addition to explaining about their own situation, they gave evidence about persecution of friends and family members that they had witnessed first hand. After giving their initial testimony, witnesses answered questions asked by the panel.

### (3.2.2) Recorded witness testimony

The Inquiry heard evidence from three witnesses who had managed to flee Iran and were living in Turkey (where significant numbers of Iranians seek refuge) but who were not able to travel to London. The panel was given the opportunity to provide questions for the witnesses, and these questions formed the basis of interviews that took place in Turkey. The resulting evidence was recorded and the footage viewed at the Westminster hearings.

### (3.2.3) Background witnesses

At the end of the three initial hearings the panel requested further evidence from a senior member of the British Embassy in Iran (which was forced to close in November 2011), and a representative of BBC Persian (which witnesses had referred to as one of the few trusted news sources in Iran). The panel went on to hear evidence from Jane Marriott, who was the UK's Deputy Ambassador to Iran for the 18 months preceding the embassy's closure in November 2011, and Sadeq Saba, Editor of BBC Persian, part of the BBC World Service. The Inquiry also entered into dialogue with the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran, who submitted a written statement for inclusion in the report.

### (3.2.4) Written evidence

In addition to the evidence gathered at the hearings, the panel received written evidence from organisations and NGOs that work with or on behalf of the international persecuted Church.

### (3.2.5) Visit to Turkey

In August 2012, delegates for the Inquiry made a visit to Turkey and heard evidence from a large number of witnesses (including those who had given videotaped evidence to the Westminster panel). This visit also incorporated a meeting with representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

<sup>4</sup> <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2011/may/11/2011-report-us-commission-international-religious-freedom>





## 4. Iranian Legal System

**4.1** Officially there are three protected minority religions in Iran: Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism. Under Article 13 of the Iranian constitution, Christians are guaranteed freedom to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their religion in their personal affairs and education of their children. However, this freedom is stipulated to be “within the limits of the law”, and in practice these limits have been interpreted very narrowly by the Iranian authorities. It should also be noted that these provisions have been interpreted to relate solely to those born into ethnically Christian families. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is considered apostasy, which is a crime under Shari’a law. Under the constitution ethnic Christians (Armenians and Assyrians) are entitled to hold three of the approximately 270 seats in the Majlis (parliament).

**4.2** While the rights of Christians are codified in the Iranian constitution, the Penal Code tends to follow Shari’a law, under which Christians and other non-Muslim minorities are deemed to be second-class citizens. Therefore many of the rules and regulations actually in force in Iran in fact disregard the freedoms for minorities that are specified in the constitution.

**4.3** The constitution stipulates that a judge’s first course of action should be to apply the codified laws of the country, but if no applicable codified law can be found, then the judge may refer to Shari’a law in making his decision.

*A judge shall be required to try to find out the verdict of every lawsuit in codified laws; if he fails to find out, he shall render a verdict on the matter under consideration based on authentic Islamic sources or authoritative Fatwas. He may not refrain from dealing with the case and rendering a judgment on the pretext of silence, inadequacy or brevity of or contradiction in codified laws.*

**Article 167 of the Iranian constitution**

*When a crime is brought before a judge he uses the codified laws (including the constitution and the Islamic Penal Code) as his framework, but when alleged crimes, which are not codified come before him he can use Shari’a as his framework. This includes crimes such as apostasy and blasphemy, which are codified nowhere in Iran’s laws but are prominent concepts within Shari’a. These articles create a loophole through which Shari’a can be meshed with the codified laws. Furthermore, even in the codified laws there are laws which transgress the constitutional provisions for religious freedom and freedom of expression.*

**Hossein Jadidi, Iranian Human Rights lawyer, 17 August 2012, Turkey**



## 5. Evidence of Persecution

### 5.1 Background

**(5.1.1)** The panel gathered evidence of widespread and targeted persecution of the most severe kind towards Christians in Iran. It found that the most brutal forms of persecution are predominantly aimed at the (mainly evangelical) churches that engage in evangelism. Official churches that don't conduct services in Farsi and contain their activities within their own ethnic group have largely, but not entirely, managed to avoid the more severe and violent forms of oppression.

*The Armenian Orthodox and Assyrian Orthodox have not been involved in evangelism among Iranian folk. If an Iranian Muslim would like to attend the church they will not allow them to do so. They've got some sort of understanding with the Government.*

**Rev Sam Yeghnazar, Elam Ministries, 16 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.1.2)** In order to avoid close monitoring and control by the government, many churches choose to eschew traditional church buildings in favour of smaller groups that meet in homes and are harder for the regime to locate and monitor.

*When they put further pressure and limits on the church, more concentration went into cell groups and home churches and eventually they were hidden from the eyes of the Government to be safer.*

**Eric Leon, 23 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

### 5.2 Execution and assassination

**(5.2.1)** Witnesses gave evidence that in the early 1990s the Government carried out a concerted plan of persecution against the Church, and a group of eight prominent leaders were killed by the Iranian regime. One such leader, Rev Hossein Soodmand, was executed without trial. Rev Soodmand's daughter, who was 13 at the time of his death, gave evidence to the Inquiry.

*They found him and asked him to come, so he went to the religious police. We didn't have any news of him and my mum was very worried. After two weeks, a pastor from Tehran went to the religious police and asked about my father. They said, "We executed him two weeks ago."*

*I remember once my mum went to the place and said, "Give me the reason, Christianity is not a good reason to kill people, we have rights, Christianity is free, the religion is free in Iran. Why did you kill my husband?" They said, "Tell your Jesus to come and make him alive." We didn't have any right answer from them and it was very hard for my family.*

**Rashin Soodmand, 30 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.2.2)** Witnesses testified that the prominent evangelist the late Rev Mehdi Dibaj, who was arrested in the 1980s, was released from prison to satisfy a growing international outcry about the treatment of Christians in Iran, but shortly afterwards was found murdered. The man who led the international campaign on his behalf was also murdered days after Rev Dibaj's release.

*The Iranian Government obviously didn't want to carry out the execution [of Rev Mehdi Dibaj] because it would be bad for the image of Iran. Through the efforts of people like Baroness Cox and David Alton the world was already aware of*



his situation, and so every year the judicial system would postpone the sentence and he would appeal. Finally after nine years he got tired and he said: "Either kill me, it would be an honour to die for my faith, or release me".

So a date was set and once the world got to know about it they pressured the Iranian Government and very quickly they released him. Within three days Bishop Haik was found dead, and within five months my own father [Rev Dibaj] was secretly murdered. I believe it was in 1996 when the more reformist President Khatami ordered an investigation into these killings and it turned out that actually members of the Intelligence Ministry were behind them. Some of them were removed from their posts but with the election of President Ahmadinejad the same people are now back in position.

**Issa Dibaj, son of Rev Mehdi Dibaj, 23 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

In 1996 they killed another one of our ministers, he was the youngest of them all. He was 34 years old and had two small children. They had executed him in a forest and put a letter in his pocket, supposedly written by him that he had killed himself, committed suicide. They called and told me that "if you don't declare to the whole world that this man has committed suicide we would put more pressure on you". Of course I didn't give them the letter that they wanted, I told them "I am very sure that you have killed him because a week before his death he had written a plan that he had for the whole year for his Christian activity".

**Rev Edward Hovsepian, 30 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

### 5.3 Imprisonment

**(5.3.1)** Witnesses testified to the fact that arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of Christians is widespread in Iran, despite clear constitutional rules that dictate how long prisoners may be held without charge.

Since June 2010, a large number of unsanctioned or "underground" house churches have been violently raided, with items confiscated and members arrested and interrogated. Over 300 Christians are confirmed to have been arrested and interrogated in at least 48 cities across Iran during 2011; however, the full figure is almost certainly far higher. The majority of those arrested were released following questioning and a brief incarceration. However, many were called back for further interrogation and at least 41 spent between one month and a year in prison, some without being formally charged and with many facing extended periods of solitary confinement.

**CSW, written submission to the Inquiry**

**(5.3.2)** Rev Sam Yeghnazar of Elam Ministries, an organisation that runs training courses for Iranian Christian leaders, gave evidence to the Inquiry about the experiences of the people who have attended its college. On their return to Iran, 20% of students have subsequently been imprisoned at some time, for periods ranging from one month to 16 months. Other witnesses related their own experience of imprisonment and testified to incarceration of significant length, often including very long periods of solitary confinement and aggressive interrogation.

The Government has increased the arbitrary arrests of Christian converts and regularly raids their houses and churches. The police interrogate and pressure them to return to Islam, and detain them for an unspecified time, varying from one day up to several years. Often, arrested Christians are not informed of the charge against them and are often denied legal representation. Generally, converts are not sentenced to death for apostasy but are being

sentenced for other charges, such as offences based on religious belief; acting against state security; taking part in illegal gatherings; drug smuggling; being a threat to state security; or anti-government activities. It is common practice to maintain the charges against the prisoners after their release, in order to have a ground to threaten them with re-imprisonment at any time.

**Open Doors, written submission to the Inquiry**

**(5.3.3)** Witnesses described the Iranian regime's practice of arresting large numbers of house-church Christians over the Christmas period each year, and particularly drew attention to the fact that there is generally no attempt to contact the families of those arrested afterwards, meaning they can be left unaware of why their loved one has disappeared for a considerable time. One witness described how the family of a couple who had been arrested searched hospitals and morgues, trying to find news of their whereabouts.

**(5.3.4)** However, the witnesses indicated their belief that the Iranian Government does care about the views of the international community, and particularly that it wishes to conceal the extent of its violation of the rights of freedom of expression and freedom of religion and belief. Witnesses believed that the Iranian government recognises that it would face condemnation if the scale of imprisonment of conscience was known.

Once, President Ahmadinejad came out of the country and somebody asked him about the other prisoners, not Christians but other political prisoners, and he said "No we don't have any political prisoners". But we have prisons full of political prisoners.

**Rashin Soodmand, 30 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.3.5)** Conditions in the prisons where Christians are held are very poor, particularly in Evin Prison, a notorious facility with very low standards and severe overcrowding. As a result, numerous prisoners develop illnesses during their period of incarceration, some of which continue even after their release. Prisoners will often have no contact at all with family or friends during the time of their imprisonment; some reported that they were denied access to a legal representative.

There are credible reports of the physical and psychological abuse of Christian prisoners in Iran. Such reports are consistent with more general reports of Iran's treatment of detainees, which consistently document widespread violation of rights.

**Middle East Concern, written submission to the Inquiry**

In a room where 22 people can hardly stay, 45 people were there. In a hall that 120 can stay in, about 325 were. Most of the people there were drug addicts and those who smoked. Most of the time we were sick. We couldn't get well and the doctor only gave antibiotics. In this condition I would hear from time to time that my wife [who was also imprisoned at this time] was very unwell. She previously had problems with her stomach and this was aggravated in the prison. When she would call she would say "I cannot drink the water because it is contaminated". She said "I cannot eat because if I eat I cannot retain the food". She had severe pains and infection.

**Vahik Abrahamian, 16 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

I was then handed two blankets: I slept on top of one and under the other since no bed was provided.

**Ladan, 30 April 2012, Westminster hearings**



*We could not use the bathroom those days because the yard folk were crammed into the bathrooms. There were three bathrooms and three toilets for about three hundred people in that section of the prison. Three taps — and we had to shave and clean our teeth and wash our clothes with these taps.*

**Khalil Yar-Ali, 15 August 2012, Turkey**

#### 5.4 Mistreatment, beatings and torture

**(5.4.1)** Witnesses reported use of torture against Christian prisoners, both physical torture and psychological torture, including extreme use of solitary confinement.

*One of the leaders of the house churches... for three months they tortured him and they burned different parts of his body, they broke his teeth.*

**Rev Edward Hovsepian, 30 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

*For three years he [Rev Mehdi Dibaj] was in solitary confinement, we didn't know where he was and he was not allowed any visitors. He was also beaten.*

**Issa Dibaj, 23 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

*On one occasion Farshid [Farshid Fathi, an Iranian church leader who has been imprisoned since December 2010] was told to pack his few belongings and was led out to the prison gate, where he could see other inmates being released. However, on approaching the gate Farshid was suddenly stopped and returned to his cell. Such forms of psychological torture are used routinely within Iran's prison system.*

**Elam Ministries, written submission to the Inquiry**

*Four people stood there and took it in turns to shout and scream at me or beat me and slap me in the face... I asked about how my wife was once and they began really beating me, beating from behind and in front and if I said something they did not like they would bash me. They tried to make me cooperate, saying:*

*"We will cripple you for the rest of your life, you will carry it with you that you did not cooperate." They asked a lot about Elam, about the members of my churches and asked me for my email password. I had one email account that wasn't very important. I gave them that email address password. They realised this was not my main account and they said in the interrogation session the next day, "Give us your password for your main email account." This email account would prove my communication with Farshid [Fathi], so I refused to give it. I said "My password is personal". They said "We will show you what is personal". They made me stand up and stripped off my shorts and they threatened to rape me. So I gave the password.*

*They lay me down and whipped me. They kept beating me on the head. They regularly would threaten me with execution during the interrogations. This process of interrogations took 29 days.*

**Mostafa Shokrollahi, 18 August 2012, Turkey**

*I was put into solitary confinement. I soon discovered my cell was located next to a torture chamber because every night I would hear the sounds of people screaming and crying. They were taking people there and torturing them.*

**Khalil Yar-Ali, 15 August 2012, Turkey**

**(5.4.2)** One form of psychological torture mentioned by witnesses is mock execution, where prisoners are blindfolded and led to believe they are being taken to be killed. Other psychological tactics include giving false information about family and friends of the prisoner, or threatening family members. Sleep deprivation was also cited, including the use of loud noises (particularly banging of heavy iron doors) to prevent prisoners from sleeping, or waking them from sleep to go for interrogation.

*Detainees regularly experience solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, illness as a result of privations, denial of medical treatment, unsanitary conditions in prison and forms of psychological and physical torture during interrogation. Torture is used to pressure individuals into making confessions or providing information on fellow Christians and religious activities.*

**Christian Solidarity Worldwide, written submission to the Inquiry**

*Once a week we had 10 minutes' fresh air and once a week we were allowed a five-minute shower. My cell was 2m by 1.5m and the loo was in the cell too. There was a bare, bright lamp that was on 24 hours a day, so I could neither sleep nor have any privacy. I had maybe one hour of sleep per day towards the end. I begged them to turn the light off but they wouldn't. The door of cell was steel with a little hatch; in the middle of night they would come and bang it just to disturb and scare us. Whilst imprisoned, I heard them beating Farshid for ages as punishment for trying to communicate with me through the cell doors — they had broken his head through the beating.*

**Nader, 18 August 2012, Turkey**

*Sometimes the daily interrogation sessions would run from 8am until 11pm. They had a strategy: there were always two people who came to interrogate me; one was tough and harsh and the other was reasonable and trying to reason with me about my faith. They wanted the identities of the members of my churches. They would threaten me by saying things like "we have your wife captive" and then telling me that if I cooperated with them, they would help me.*

**Behzad Panahi Vahid, 15 August 2012, Turkey**

**(5.4.3)** Witnesses reported how they had been severely beaten during their arrest and sustained substantial injuries that were left untended during their imprisonment.

*We were travelling home to Tabriz on our motorcycle when a car came out in front of us. We tried to escape but one of the police aimed a gun at us. Another policeman stopped him from shooting. We tried to escape by using a shortcut but the police were following. Our bike hit a curb and we crashed. It was a bad accident; the contact lenses came out of my eyes, my face was full of blood and my friend's leg was broken... The police took us to the station and questioned and beat us. We were put in separate cells. We were continuously questioned until six the next morning and our injuries were not tended to.*

**Natan Roufergarbashi, 23 April 2012, Westminster hearings**



*I yelled at them that my leg was broken but they kept kicking me and then lifted me up and started hitting me from behind until I would fall down again. They forced us to walk 200m to their car while still beating us... They did not do anything for my broken leg until about the seventh or eighth day when they took me to a hospital and they put a plastic mould on it. I was limping for six or seven months after the accident and I still have pains sometimes. The interrogators had told me they would do nothing to treat my leg and were trying to scare me by saying I would lose it from the knee down. It was totally black.*

**Farhad, 16 August 2012, Turkey**

**(5.4.4)** Because of the severity of the beatings they receive, poor conditions and lack of access to medical care, former prisoners report significant medical symptoms long after their incarceration.

*When I came out, I was traumatised. In the beginning I would have flashbacks to the beatings and it was terrible. I had been a driver for 10 years and never had an accident but after a few days of coming out of the prison I had a road accident. Since my time inside I have had a continuous headache from all the beatings. I get shaky knees sometimes.*

**Mostafa Shokrollahi, 18 August 2012, Turkey**

## 5.5 Government control of churches and threats towards individuals

**(5.5.1)** As previously mentioned, the Iranian regime imposes strict conditions on how and when churches may offer worship services, making it difficult to be a practising Christian in the country.

*Attending a church service on a Sunday means foregoing work — and pay — to attend: a difficult decision in a country reported to have 21.5% inflation as at 19 March 2012. In 2009 the Central Church of Tehran was ordered to close its Friday Farsi-speaking services. Those Christians attending the Friday Farsi service desired to worship in their own language, and although attendance at a Sunday service comes at a personal financial cost, the number of Christians at Sunday Farsi-speaking services has significantly increased following the closure of the Friday services. In February 2012, Authorities also forced the last two official churches (Emmanuel Protestant Church and St Peter's Evangelical Church) offering Friday Farsi-speaking services to close these services. Such orders severely limit Iranian Christians' freedom to worship — an integral element of freedom of religion.*

**Open Doors, written submission to the Inquiry**

**(5.5.2)** Witnesses reported that in the 33 years since the Iranian Revolution, the regime has closed down the Iranian Bible Society, and 10 major churches in cities across the country. The Inquiry heard evidence that, for the churches that are allowed to continue operating, strict rules and regulations are enforced by threats of imprisonment.

*In 2004 they suddenly came in the meeting of 10 Assemblies of God churches and took them to prison. For four nights they kept them in solitary confinement and released them only with this condition: you have no right to evangelise*

*or accept new members, you have no right to baptise anyone. You have to submit to us the full list of all the church members. You have no right to conduct any conferences outside the church building. Inside the church also if you want to have a conference we should be informed and we should know about the subject of the conference. You have to report all the journeys you are making, and you have to submit regular reports to us. In a very strict way they put those churches who have buildings under surveillance.*

*They always threatened me as somebody responsible for the church and there were three areas that they would threaten. First, that they would close our churches if we didn't listen to them and obey. Second that they would imprison us, and the third threat was that they could kill us. And they would say, we will kill you in such a way that no one would know that it was our work. When they realised that we are not afraid in spite of the threats and we are continuing our work, they increased the pressure. My brother, Haik Hovsepian Mehr, they killed him. I was his assistant and so this was not against the church only, they wanted to tell me that if I didn't obey then they would kill me as well.*

**Rev Edward Hovsepian, 30 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.5.2)** Witnesses explained that for this reason more than 10 prominent churches have moved the focus of their activities away from large central services and concentrated on smaller, less conspicuous groups that meet in homes. These meetings are kept secret because of a belief that if the regime finds out about them the members are likely to be arrested and detained.

*The Government has put CCTV across the street to take the picture of everyone who is going inside the church and now they want a full identity of the church members. So now the church has come to realise that if they co-operate with the Government it is not going to be less problematic for them.*

**Rev Sam Yeghnazar, 16 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

*The house churches, they have to be hidden from the Government. If the Government finds out, or any neighbour informs the Government, they will definitely, immediately attack and arrest all of them. Last Christmas they attacked many of these house groups and arrested over 100 people who were praying and having fellowship and worshipping God. Some of them even now are there in prison.*

**Eric Leon, 23 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.5.3)** This point was reinforced by evidence given by Jane Marriott, who was Deputy Ambassador at the British Embassy in Iran before its closure in November 2011.

*We've seen, as your committee has also heard, evidence of an increase in attacks and closing down of house churches, of the churches themselves being monitored. There are a couple of lovely old churches not far from the British Embassy, and Christians that I would speak to, and of course there are a lot of Armenian Christians, were beginning to be nervous about going to the big churches because people felt they were being monitored or photographed after they left the churches, which is I think where you saw a shift to the house churches and then a clamping down on the house churches.*

**Jane Marriott, former Deputy Ambassador to Iran, 5 July 2012, Westminster hearings**



**(5.5.4)** The panel heard evidence about the regime's practice of threatening friends and family members of Christians who refuse to cease their religious activities after interrogation or imprisonment.

*The Intelligence agents called in a colleague of mine for questioning. Afraid, the colleague did not go, only for the Ministry to call again. This time she complied and went for questioning. She was informed that she had committed a crime by befriending me, and that her own job was now in jeopardy. The colleague was an old friend of mine who had sorted out the job for me. She was a Christian too, but not involved in a church. The Intelligence continued to call me and to harass all the people I was in touch with and they called my colleague again and asked her if I was still working for the company. A number of days after this, I realised that it was not safe for me to have any relationship with anyone. My colleagues were stressed every time the phone rang in case it was the security agents.*

**Ladan, 30 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.5.5)** In his evidence to the Inquiry, Sadeq Saba, Editor of BBC Persian, reported similar intimidation techniques used against the families of Iranian journalists based in London.

*This new phenomenon started about six months ago, when suddenly I was at work and a colleague of mine came to me and said her sister had been arrested in Tehran by the Intelligence Ministry people. They sent a message to her that they wanted to talk to her in London. This was the first time that a regime was trying to interrogate somebody through the internet, because they said to her that if she doesn't talk to them her sister in Tehran would be in danger.*

*They started calling parents in Tehran, and they were asking them to tell staff in London either not to work for the BBC or to give information on the BBC, and they were also giving all sorts of wrong information to the parents in Tehran, such as "Do you know that your daughter is sleeping with so and so? Do you know your son is a drug addict?" Those kinds of tactics are really despicable.*

**Sadeq Saba, Editor, BBC Persian, 5 July 2012, Westminster hearings**

### 5.6 Appropriation of property and Bible-burning

**(5.6.1)** The Inquiry heard various reports of incidences of confiscation and burning of Bibles, including an instance in October 2010 near the Turkish border where 300 Bibles were burned, one on 2 February 2011 at Salmas, and one incident where Bibles were confiscated on a train between Turkey to Iran. The numbers of Bibles taken on these occasions ranged from 200 to 10,000<sup>5</sup>.

**(5.6.2)** Government forces have also raided churches and church buildings and confiscated property. The regime has even appropriated Christian hospitals and schools in Shiraz and Esfahan<sup>6</sup>. Elam Ministries

reports that many individuals who have been identified as Christian by the authorities have their homes raided by government agents, and that during these raids all belongings relating to their Christian faith and ministry are confiscated. According to Elam's sources, those who have had their houses raided report that laptops, Christian books, DVDs, photographs and passports and identification documents are seized, and rarely do the victims manage to reclaim any of their confiscated property.

### 5.7 Unjust bail

**(5.7.1)** When Christians are released from prison, witnesses testified that it is commonplace for extremely heavy bail prices to be set. This often results in family members having to pledge the deeds of their home to secure a prisoner's release. Sometimes the money is raised causing great hardship, but when bail is paid the authorities may still refuse to release the prisoner. Released prisoners are generally not allowed to leave the country, so that if they are forced to flee for their safety, the bail is forfeit.

*The Kalibar court said I could be released on bail of 20 million Tomans [\$16,000]. A family member's house deeds were put up.*

**Natan Roufergash, 23 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

*And so after two months had passed they freed me temporarily on bail paying equivalent of \$10,000, about 10m Tomans. It was heavy amount for us but we paid anyhow.*

**Vahik Abrahamian, 16 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

*The majority of the Christians arrested during 2011 have now been released, either on bail awaiting trial or following severe warnings against any further participation in Christian activity. The families of many have been forced to hand over the title deeds to their homes to meet bail payments. Such bail demands contravene Iranian law and seem primarily designed to cripple the Christian community economically, and to delay the release of the detainees. Once released, they are closely monitored, and risk re-arrest and imprisonment if they engage or are suspected of engaging in any Christian activity. Many face a gruelling legal process until their case is finally heard. This process can take several years, leaving their lives in limbo. Those awaiting trial who flee the country are tried in absentia.*

**Christian Solidarity Worldwide, written submission to the Inquiry**

### 5.8 Lack of respect due process in law

**(5.8.1)** While in theory in Iran there is separation between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, witnesses testified that in practice the most senior government figures change or disregard laws at will. Therefore Christians can be imprisoned without legal justification or trial, or on bogus charges.

*What normally happens is that the authorities accuse the convert of acting against national security. This is the main charge leveled against Christians. Besides the accusation of acting against national security, another accusation against Christians in Iran is that they have blasphemed and have insulted the sacred principles of Islam. As evidence, they sometimes refer to passages of the Bible where what the Bible says is not in agreement with the teachings of Islam. They use this as an excuse to convict the Christian of insulting Islam's sacred principles.*

**Hossein Jadidi, Iranian Human Rights lawyer, 17 August 2012, Turkey**

<sup>5</sup> "The Iranian authorities have burned Bibles that they have confiscated. In May 2010 they burned hundreds of Bibles and New Testaments intercepted on the Iraqi border. In October last year more than 300 New Testaments were taken and burned by security forces on the Turkish border. Only three months ago, on 7 February 2011, 300 New Testaments were seized by authorities in Salmas, in West Azerbaijan, and publicly burned." Andrew Selous MP, HC Deb, 24 May 2011, c856

<sup>6</sup> "They took away the properties of the Episcopal churches, even the Christian hospitals in Shiraz and Esfahan and the school. Even the house of the bishop." Rev Edward Hovsepian, 30 April 2012, Westminster hearings



**(5.8.2)** It is not uncommon for Christians to be held without any charge for prolonged periods of time. This is in direct contravention of the Iranian Penal Code, which states that if somebody is arrested the charges against them must be explained within 24 hours.

*In many cases, the accused does not even know what he is accused of. With regard to Christian converts, they normally arrest them first and after a while accuse them of several charges, the first of which is apostasy. They try to frighten the accused by mentioning that apostasy carries the death sentence. Other charges that normally follow are acting against national security and insulting the sacred principles of Islam.*

**Hossein Jadidi, Iranian Human Rights lawyer, 17 August 2012, Turkey**

*After 9½ years' imprisonment [that of Rev Mehdi Dibaj], the head of the prison wrote in Farsi exactly these words: "Since the accusation of this man in prison is not clear yet, he is not eligible to have any vacation." According to their own law, nobody can be arrested for more than 48 hours without telling him his accusation, telling him his charge. They kept this poor guy 9½ years and they were saying his accusation was not clear.*

**Eric Leon, 23 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

*I was never given any written documents detailing the charge against me; everything from my arrest to my release was done verbally.*

**Ladan, 30 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.8.3)** Many witnesses reported a lack of due process surrounding their arrest and imprisonment. Arrests often have the character of a kidnapping, without any prior warning or summons. Members of the Intelligence Ministry raid the homes of Christians and arrest them, or take them off the street. Prisoners are often refused permission to contact a lawyer or relatives, which means that weeks can go by while families search hospitals and morgues, not knowing where their relative is.

*Regarding one couple whose case I took up, they were arrested one afternoon by the agents of the Intelligence Ministry. For about a week no one knew what had happened to them. Their family members were worried and were looking for them in hospitals, in morgues and so on, until they were contacted by the Intelligence Ministry and were told that the two were in custody. After about two weeks, I went and introduced myself to the authorities as the couple's lawyer. They were at first very rude to me and even threatened me, but when I insisted on my rights as their lawyer, they registered me as their lawyer and asked me to sign that they are not allowed any visitors. Even I was not allowed to visit them. This was illegal, as the lawyer always has a right to meet his defendant, albeit in the presence of prison guards. So it was just recorded in their file that they have me as their lawyer, but in actual fact they had no access to a lawyer.*

**Hossein Jadidi, Iranian Human Rights lawyer, 17 August 2012, Turkey**

## 5.9 Discrimination

**(5.9.1)** In Iran, non-Muslims are not permitted to hold government jobs or work in positions of seniority with respect to Muslims. It is also difficult for non-Muslims to get permission to attend university. It is usual for application forms for education or employment to include a question about religion, and people who state that they are Christians on such forms are

likely to face discrimination. Similarly, when parents apply for their children to get a place in school, they are required to state their religion. Christians are not allowed to attend the majority of state schools. There are special schools for Armenian and Assyrian children, but Muslim converts can find they are excluded from both types of school.

*Discrimination in Iranian society is mostly in the form of job discrimination, when you cannot go to university, when you cannot get a job. Sometimes the Government calls the employer and says: "You have converts in your midst — get rid of them," so people lose their jobs.*

**Issa Dibaj, 23 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.9.2)** Witnesses testified that Christians therefore generally try to work on a self-employed basis, but their businesses may not be permitted to fulfil government contracts or work on government projects.

**(5.9.3)** During court proceedings, witnesses reported that judges sometimes offer to rule in their favour, on the condition that they deny their faith. One witness testified about the custody hearings that followed her divorce, where she was told that she could keep her young daughter if she renounced Christ. When she did not, her daughter was placed in her ex-husband's sole custody and she has not seen her for seven years.

*He showed me a paper from the court and a letter saying that the court had divorced me and given my daughter to him because I was Christian. They mentioned in the letter "because you are Christian". I went to the court to protest this law and this letter. Once, when I was in the highest court, I was in front of two judges, both of them were clergy members and they said: "You have options. If you say to us in front of the judges you are not a Christian, if you tell us this we will give you back your daughter." But they confirmed the earlier ruling and my 2½-year-old daughter remained in the sole custody of my ex-husband.*

**Catharine, 16 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.9.4)** Discrimination also takes the form of not allowing Christians the same freedom of expression as Muslims, particularly relating to religion. This is despite the fact that these rights are supposedly enshrined in the Iranian constitution.

*Even moderate forms of religious expression and routine association with like-minded persons can bring Christian converts to the attention of the Iranian authorities. The rights denied Christian converts include the rights to free expression and free association with others, in addition to the right to hold and manifest a religious belief of one's choice.*

**Middle East Concern, written submission to the Inquiry**

## 5.10 Propaganda

**(5.10.1)** The most senior political figures in the Iranian regime have made repeated attempts publicly to discredit Christians and the Christian faith. In November 2010, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei made a speech saying that Iranian house churches "threaten Islamic faith and deceive young Muslims"<sup>7</sup>. In 2011 President Ahmadinejad

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.allvoices.com/contributed-news/7318781-iranian-christians-under-serious-threat-of-persecution>

made a public call for an end to the development of Christianity in Iran, while the Governor General of Tehran, Morteza Tamadon, in a speech described evangelical Christianity as “corrupt and deviant”<sup>8</sup>.

**(5.10.2)** Observers believe that these public denouncements have contributed to an increase in persecution across the country, from both government and non-government sources.

*These comments are widely considered to have encouraged the intensification of pressure experienced by house churches since that time onwards. We are concerned that the clear and very public anti-Christian message delivered by the authorities sends a message to extremist or other community-based groups, including the families of Christian converts, who are able to act with impunity in taking extra-judicial action against converts.*

**Middle East Concern, written submission to the Inquiry**

**(5.10.3)** Witnesses reported that they were aware of speeches made by senior individuals in government claiming that evangelism is an attempt to corrupt Iranians and make them like Westerners<sup>9</sup>. Witnesses also testified that the speeches given at many mosques at Friday-night prayers are also anti-Christian<sup>10</sup>.

*The supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the Minister of Information, they officially said the house churches are poisons and we have to close them down. They were very upset because Christianity is spreading through thousands of house churches and the President has said that we have to dry up the root of Christianity in Iran.*

**Rev Edward Hovsepian, 30 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

<sup>8</sup> Open Doors, written submission to the Inquiry

<sup>9</sup> “They say that they want to make people Christian so they will become corrupt like the West, drinking alcohol and living corrupt lives.” Rev Edward Hovsepian, 30 April 2012

<sup>10</sup> Vahik Abrahamian, 16 April 2012

## 5.11 Interference with media

**(5.11.1)** Because of the dangers of attending a church, Iranian Christians use the internet as a means of communication and fellowship. However, witnesses reported that the internet is filtered and censored by the Iranian authorities, and websites are monitored by the Government to find ways of tracking down Christians.

*I didn't use my own identity or give out any personal information to other internet users, so that the intelligence services who filter the internet did not have the ability to locate me. I believe I pastored 300 people or so [through an online church], maybe up to 450 by now. I taught lots of people and some people joined the leadership to help me in my ministry.*

**Natan Roufergarbashi, 23 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.11.2)** The panel heard evidence that there is also government interference to prevent Iranians having access to foreign radio and television content.

*BBC news is jammed, and recently the Government has started to collect satellite dishes so it is illegal to have dishes. But radio is still popular, surprisingly popular in Iran, because people don't have access to internet. Well, they have access to the internet but most sites are filtered and television is jammed.*

**Issa Dibaj, 23 April 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.11.3)** Sadeq Saba, Editor of BBC Persian, was invited to give evidence to the Inquiry specifically on the issue of media interference. He confirmed that, despite having 16 hours per day of content specifically for the Persian market (either Farsi-language content or English-language content that has been dubbed), the BBC struggles to broadcast in Iran because of the Government’s action in jamming its satellite signal. The BBC uses a satellite called Hot Bird, owned by the French company Eutelsat, to transmit its programmes. This is the same satellite used by the Iranian Government to broadcast its own state television channel, Press TV. But while all Iranians with appropriate equipment are able to see Press TV, the regime has the technology to jam the BBC signal and make it impossible to view. Unfortunately the process of jamming BBC Persian also affects other stations with proximate bandwidth, meaning that Eutelsat is forced to remove BBC Persian altogether to avoid collateral damage to other customers.

*Iran itself is using Hot Bird and other satellites to broadcast its programmes... There should be an understanding in the international community and the satellite industry that if Iran behaves badly then it should be punished. If Iran is using Hot Bird to broadcast Press TV, but at the same time jams BBC Persian service and forces the owner of Hot Bird to remove us because it damages other channels, Iran should be told very directly that if you do that you are not going to be able to use our satellite.*

**Sadeq Saba, Editor, BBC Persian, 5 July 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.11.4)** Mr Saba testified that this is an area where he believes lobbying by British politicians could make a significant difference.

*We have been asking the satellite industry ourselves for a long time that they should do this, but they say they can't unless there is a resolution, a demand, by the international community. They say that as a commercial organisation, they can't make judgments. But if there is a demand by the EU or the UN Security Council, then satellite owners of course have to obey.*

**Sadeq Saba, Editor, BBC Persian, 5 July 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(5.11.5)** Following this evidence, a representative of the Foreign Office Iran team wrote to the Chairman of the Inquiry to outline the measures being taken by the British Government to support the BBC. Alistair Burt MP, Minister for the Middle East, made a statement on 3 February 2012, expressing concern about the intimidation of BBC Persian staff. Following this, senior Foreign Office officials met with World Service staff in April 2012 to discuss the ongoing situation.

**(5.11.6)** The Foreign Office outlined ways in which it is working with partners in the EU and UN to build international pressure on the Iranian regime to cease its harassment of human-rights defenders. On 23 March 2012, the EU passed a new set of sanctions extending the number of Iranians sanctioned for human rights abuses, including the head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organisation, which had broadcast forced “confessions” of individuals that the regime claims are linked to BBC Persian.

**(5.11.7)** In the World Radio Conference in Geneva, the Foreign Office worked with partners to change in the Radio Regulations to strengthen the requirements for member states to take action against jamming emanating from their territory. The EU now has a prohibition in place on the sale to Iran of all equipment that could be used to restrict communications.





## 6. Liaison with United Nations Human Rights Efforts

### 6.1 UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran

**(6.1.1)** The Inquiry was able to open up a dialogue with the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran, who despite not being given permission by the Iranian Government to visit the country has nevertheless done significant work to research the situation regarding human rights in Iran through interviews. He has published two reports of his findings.

**(6.1.2)** The conclusions drawn by the rapporteur align closely with the findings of the Christians in Parliament panel, and the rapporteur made this statement to the Inquiry about the evidence he has gathered:

*Since I began my mandate as UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran in August 2011, I have worked to establish a dialogue with the Iranian Government to discuss a number of disturbing reports about multifarious infringements on freedom of religion and belief. These reports portray an atmosphere of fear, in which adherents of recognized and unrecognized religions, including Christians, are subject to severe restrictions on their ability to manifest their beliefs. Reports communicate allegations of arbitrary arrest, detention, as well as psychological and physical torture for the purposes of soliciting information about individuals, and about the activities of Christian institutions. I have also been informed that over 300 Christians have fled the country since 2009, and that at least 22 Christians are currently detained. This alarming trend raises serious concerns about the Iranian Government's capacity to meet its international commitments, and undermines its efforts to effectively promote respect for human rights in the country. Therefore, I shall continue to make every effort*

*to engage Iranian officials in a constructive and substantive dialogue about these and other concerns, and I look forward to working towards an affirmative response to my request to visit Iran in order to establish the veracity of the allegations communicated to me.*

**Dr Shaheed Ahmed, UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran**

### 6.2 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR Turkey)

**(6.2.1)** During the Inquiry's trip to Turkey, members of the APPG met with Karim Atassi, Deputy Representative of UNHCR Turkey, and Annika Sandlund, Senior Protection Officer of UNHCR Turkey. The delegates discussed the situation of refugees in Turkey, the issues faced by Christian refugees, and the future of Turkey's refugee programme.

**(6.2.2)** Turkey accepts refugees on a scale unequaled in the rest of the world — UNHCR Turkey estimates the current number to be around 100,000 — and is actively seeking assistance from other UN countries to help bear the burden of non-European refugees. In 2012 the USA accepted 7,000 persons for resettlement from Turkey, Canada accepted 900 and Australia accepted 400.

**(6.2.3)** Currently the Refugee Status Determination process is administered by UNHCR Turkey, but the delegation heard about a piece of legislation under consideration by the Turkish parliament that would create a new road map for refugees in the country and would be administered by the Turkish Government. This new law, if enacted as drafted at the time of the visit, is in line with current international standards. It gives asylum seekers the right to legal representation as they seek the right to remain in Turkey. All refugees and asylum

seekers would also have a right to healthcare and education for children, and the Turkish Government would accept financial responsibility for refugees. If passed, this law would come into force in 2014. UNHCR Turkey suggested that the situation of refugees in Turkey could be strengthened by British support for the legislation.

**(6.2.4)** Until the legislation is passed, provision for refugees is patchy. The governor of each province has a budget for social aid (for Turkish citizens and refugees) and people can go to the governor and ask for assistance, but there is significant variation in how refugees and asylum seekers are provided for. Currently refugees have no legal right to these funds, and they are distributed at the discretion of the governor. Refugees currently have no right to healthcare, and UNHCR Turkey is lobbying to have this addressed. The delegation underlined the importance of pressure being brought to bear on the Turkish government to achieve this.

**(6.2.5)** As persecution of Christians in Iran has

increased, so the numbers of Iranians seeking refuge in Turkey has increased. In the period 2009-2010 numbers of Iranian refugees increased by 40%, and 2012 saw a 42% increase, with 1,289 claims made per year, the majority of which are religious claims.

**(6.2.6)** The delegation raised the issue of Christian interviewees experiencing aggressive interviews by UNHCR Turkey as part of the process to assess their refugee status. This was in response to reading a number of statements from Iranian Christians who reported insensitive or inappropriate treatment during their interaction with UNHCR Turkey staff. In 2011, 2,000 Iranians claimed asylum, of which 1,048 mentioned religious persecution among their reasons, and 275 mentioned Christianity. At the time of the meeting, in 2012 more than 200 refugees had already given their Christian faith as the basis of their claim.





## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

**7.1** The conclusion of the Inquiry is that Christians in Iran are subject to ongoing persecution of the most severe kind. While there are undoubtedly instances of official, registered churches facing persecution and discrimination, the All Party Group finds that the target of the most brutal forms of persecution are those churches which allow Christians from a Muslim background to worship with them and engage in evangelism with Muslims.

**7.2** The Inquiry heard detailed evidence of the execution or murder of at least four Christian pastors at the hands of the Iranian regime. In addition the All Party Group listened to testimonies from several Christians who spoke of their own imprisonment or the imprisonment of a close family member, purely because of their Christian faith. Witnesses described instances of torture, ranging from physical torture to tactics such as sleep deprivation, and including extreme psychological torture.

**7.3** Members of evangelising churches in Iran live in constant fear of arbitrary arrest and intimidation; release is often contingent on the payment of an unjust bail price. Property, including passports and other documents, is routinely appropriated, and there is evidence that the regime has destroyed large quantities of Bibles and other Christian literature.

**7.4** Even those Christians who do not communicate their faith to Muslims face substantial discrimination in Iran. Witnesses explained how Christians are not permitted to work in any government position, and businesses run by Christians are not allowed to fulfil government contracts. Christians are not permitted to work in positions of authority over Muslims.

**7.5** The All Party Group expressed their deep solidarity with and concern for the plight of Iranian Christians. The following recommendations reflect the seriousness that the panel feels the Government should attach to the rights of Christian believers in Iran.

### 7.6 Recommendation One

We ask the British Government to use appropriate channels to urge the Iranian regime to uphold its obligations according to its own constitution and under international law, including provisions for freedom of religion or belief contained within the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a state party.

**(7.6.1)** The Inquiry heard that there is a small group within the Iranian state that is sympathetic towards calls for more robust human rights, although they are very much in the minority.

*I managed to get two or three meetings with the human rights department in the Foreign Ministry. Although much of what they gave me was pro forma, I was very much struck by the fact that there is a minority — and it is a small minority — within the Iranian system who genuinely are trying to improve their human-rights record. So when Dr Shaheed was appointed as UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights, there was a part of the Iranian system that argued that they should present papers, they should give the documents that Dr Shaheed was looking for, and that they should engage. And those people, I think, recognised the importance of adhering to international human rights standards. But the vast majority of the system is not in that place.*

**Jane Marriott, former Deputy Ambassador to Iran, 5 July 2012, Westminster hearings**





### 7.7 Recommendation Two

We note the significant role played by the British Government in promoting human rights. We ask that the British Government, as well as parliamentarians and NGOs, would engage with and encourage other European governments to speak out publicly against the persecution of Christians in Iran, as well as using any diplomatic ties to encourage the Iranian regime to uphold its obligations according to its own constitution and under international law, including provisions for freedom of religion or belief contained within the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

**(7.7.1)** The Inquiry heard evidence about the extent of British traction with Iran over the issue of human rights. Unsurprisingly, Britain's ability to influence Iran is greatly hampered by the fact that we no longer have an embassy in the country. However, Europe still offers an important opportunity to engage.

*We led on the human rights agenda with the French and Scandinavians and we have still been doing that but remotely. So we've still been plugging in to the EU community within Tehran and working on human rights issues that way. We've still been trying to gather evidence, listing more human-rights abusers, for EU sanctions to designate individuals as human rights abusers. That has continued.*

**Jane Marriott, former Deputy Ambassador to Iran, 5 July 2012, Westminster hearings**

### 7.8 Recommendation Three

We ask the British Government to support all those who work for the release of people who are imprisoned in Iran because of their faith — including the Iranian pastor Farshid Fathi, who has been incarcerated since December 2010. We urge British Parliamentarians and journalists to use all means available to publicise the persecution of Christians in Iran.

**(7.8.1)** The panel heard evidence that the most effective use of British influence is in lobbying on behalf of specific individuals.

*Collectively where we were successful and continue to be successful to some extent is in raising the profile of individual cases. Individual cases will always have more traction than themes.*

**Jane Marriott, former Deputy Ambassador to Iran, 5 July 2012, Westminster hearings**

**(7.8.2)** Mr Fathi is the pastor of an Iranian house-church network who was imprisoned in December 2010. His legitimate pastoral activities have been cast by the Iranian regime in a political light, in all likelihood to avoid international scrutiny, but in reality he is a victim of religious persecution. Mr Fathi has been denied due process and his case has been hampered by a lack of timely access to legal representation. In May 2012, CSW stated that Mr Fathi had been imprisoned "solely on the basis of his Christian convictions".

**(7.8.3)** On 24 May 2011 and 11 January 2012, Andrew Selous MP brought attention to Mr Fathi's case during debate in the House of Commons:

*I want to mention the case of Farshid Fathi, who was imprisoned just over a year ago, on 26 December 2010. He is still in Evin prison, and I have not met him, but I have met Dr Tony Sargent from the International Christian College in Glasgow, who knows him well. Farshid Fathi is a very bright and dynamic young man who is the life and soul of the party, but he is languishing in prison when he should be free to nurture a church, as he feels called to.*

**Andrew Selous MP, 11 January 2012, HC Deb, c120WH**



Christian Pastor Farshid Fathi, incarcerated in Evin Prison in Tehran since December 2010



**(7.8.4)** Several witnesses gave evidence of their belief that public pressure does have a positive effect on the Iranian regime, and they are not impervious to international pressure. Therefore the panel was surprised to hear from Sadeq Saba, the Editor of BBC Persian, that there had been relatively little reporting of persecution of Christians in Iran by the World Service until this point. However, Mr Saba made it clear that he would welcome further information about persecuted Christians, and invited human rights organisations to contact him about this issue.

#### 7.9 Recommendation Four

We call on the British Government to recognise that there is real evidence of persecution of Christians in Iran, and to ensure that the asylum system is fully aware of the situation for Christians in Iran when considering their applications for resettlement.

**(7.9.1)** During the course of the Inquiry, parliamentarians raised the issue of difficulties faced by Iranian Christians who seek asylum in Britain, and in particular the question of whether UK Border Agency staff are properly equipped to ascertain when a claim for asylum based on Christian faith is legitimate. This issue is relevant not just to claims from Iranians, but from persecuted Christians worldwide. While further comment is outside of the scope of this report, this is an area that would benefit from further Parliamentary investigation.

#### 7.10 Recommendation Five

We ask the British Government to work through European institutions to facilitate EU regulations that will ban signal-jamming on European-owned satellites.

**(7.10.1)** The Inquiry heard detailed evidence from Sadeq Saba, Editor of BBC Persian, about the issue of satellite jamming, a practice which means that many Iranians are unable to access BBC World Service programmes. In his evidence, Mr Saba testified that his research indicates that satellite companies are not unwilling to help, but are unwilling to take unilateral action to deal with this issue and are unlikely to change their position unless either EU regulation or UN resolution levels the playing field.

*I know satellite owners are very sensitive about bad publicity. They never want to be seen as, or accused of, facilitating and collaborating with despotic regimes at the expense of an organisation like the BBC, which is a brand well known around the world as an impartial organisation. So there is much I think everybody can do — parliamentarians, governments and especially I think if there is a binding resolution in the EU – that would be really helpful because many companies in the satellite industry are based in Paris.*

**Sadeq Saba, Editor, BBC Persian, 5 July 2012, Westminster hearings**

#### 7.11 Recommendation Six

We ask the British Government to support UNHCR Turkey as it seeks the implementation of the proposed Law on Foreigners and International Protection by the Turkish Government, and to work with the Turkish Government to provide safe, humanitarian refuge for persecuted Christians both in Britain and in other parts of the world.

**(7.11.1)** The Inquiry noted the significant humanitarian work undertaken by Turkey in accepting refugees on an unprecedented scale, and recognised the numbers of Iranian Christians seeking refuge in Turkey has risen substantially in recent years.

**(7.11.2)** However, the situation for refugees entering Turkey from Iran is currently uncertain. While some are able to find help, Elam Ministries reports that it is not uncommon to find individuals waiting in the system for two or three years for their status to be decided. During this time they may not be able to access healthcare or education for their children, nor are they entitled to work.

*The Turkish Government continues to accept vast numbers of refugees from bordering countries, but it needs help. The international community, including Britain, is encouraged to support the Turkish Government in their efforts. This support can be manifested through messages of solidarity for the policies adopted, and by accepting the resettlement of larger numbers of refugees from this country. All states, including the British Government, are also encouraged to do what they can to support the first ever asylum law, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which relates to the rights of those who are in Turkey awaiting the determination of their status. This law has been submitted to Parliament and will most likely be discussed during the next Parliamentary session.*

**UNHCR Turkey**

#### 7.12 Recommendation Seven

We urge the British Government to support the work of Dr Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran, in his mandate to monitor human rights, including religious freedom, in the country.

**(7.12.1)** Dr Ahmed Shaheed was appointed by the UN on 1 August 2011 as Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran, and presented his first interim report to the General Assembly in October 2011<sup>11</sup>; he presented a fuller report to the Human Rights Council in March 2012<sup>12</sup>. Despite repeatedly requesting a full-access country visit, the Iranian regime has so far refused to allow Dr Shaheed entry to the country so as to make investigations. Therefore, the interim report is based on research and interviews with NGOs and Iranians living outside of the country, many of whom have close family ties in Iran.

**(7.12.2)** The interim report draws attention to a number of human rights issues, including an “alarming increase” in the number of executions and the very poor conditions in prison. However, he continues to seek permission to enter Iran and follow up on these findings:

*The Special Rapporteur maintains that substantive engagement and access to the country would add real value to his work, and would allow the Government to communicate its views on specific issues raised in his reports. The Special Rapporteur will continue to make all efforts possible to encourage the Government to cooperate with the mandate holder and to allow him access to the country.*

**Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

<sup>11</sup> [www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/66/374](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/66/374)

<sup>12</sup> [www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/A-HRC-19-66\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/A-HRC-19-66_en.pdf)



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