



Witness Statement of Ali Kantoori

Name: Ali Kantoori
Place of Birth: Qazvin, Iran
Date of Birth: February 5, 1981

Interviewing Organization: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)
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Interviewer: IHRDC Staff

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Witness Statement

Background

1. My name is Ali Kantoori. I was born on February 5, 1981. Before I was arrested, my occupation was distribution of food-stuffs. I was also involved in sports from 1989 to 2007. In fact, that was my main occupation. In Iran, however, only soccer players and those involved in a couple of other sports can make a living. So I had to have another job.
2. I am a socio-political activist. As a socio-political activist, my goals are equality of men and women, improving conditions for the working class and abolition of the compulsory veil. I consider the latter a necessity for society, and I work towards it.
3. My activities were mostly socio-political and they took place within the context of NGOs. I was active with an NGO named *Kanoon-e Emrooz* (Today's Association) dedicated to fighting drug addiction. With much hardship, one of my friends obtained a permit for us. We met every week and made pamphlets out of the addiction-related material that we had obtained from the State Welfare Organization. Then, we distributed the pamphlets in the Tohid neighborhood, which was one of Qazvin's largest. We tried to get the local residents involved. The Imam at the local mosque allowed us to hold weekly meetings at the mosque. We mostly concentrated on prevention rather than treatment. We did, however, provide information about treatment and treatment facilities. We begged school principals to distribute our pamphlets. We also distributed the pamphlets at a seminar.
4. I was involved in organizations that worked on children's and women's rights, but I was not very active in them because they operated in Mazandaran and Tehran. I mostly worked in Qazvin, and I focused on fighting drug addiction.
5. I was also a member of Students for Freedom and Equality. The activities of Students for Freedom and Equality mostly focused on social issues. We worked a lot on the situation of the working class. Technological advances mean that more wealth is created. How is it then that the situation of the working class is getting worse? We held meetings with labor organizations.
6. Women's issues and pressuring the government in order to achieve women's rights were very important to us at Students for Freedom and Equality. The veil is not compulsory anywhere else in the world. Yet Iran, with thousands of years of civilization, has a compulsory veil law. We only took symbolic actions at our events on March 8th and December 7th, because it is not possible to take substantive action in Iran. It is the ideology of the Islamic government, and one cannot oppose it. We also were active in other provinces through NGOs. Our positions were based on the political situation at the time.

7. Children's rights was another issue. I, along with all members of Students for Freedom and Equality, believe in children's rights. Society is responsible for children's rights, not the family. The same is true about the rights of the elderly. These are not idealistic positions. Many political movements might be idealistic in nature, but women's rights and the rights of the elderly are not idealistic aspirations. They are life's necessities.
8. What Students for Freedom and Equality and I want are diametrically opposed to what the Islamic Republic wants. We did not want to get into a conflict with the Islamic Republic, because we were not after political power or seats in the parliament. But labor rights, abolition of the compulsory veil, equality of men and women, and ending interference by foreign governments in Iranian politics are real needs of Iranian society.
9. Intentionally or not, we questioned the Islamic Republic's ideology. What were the IRI's options if its agents wanted to stop our activities? They couldn't say "Ali Kantoori was working towards equality of men and women." They couldn't say that I was fighting drug addiction in Qazvin. They couldn't say that I was working towards abolition of the compulsory veil, or that I was voicing my concern about the terrible situation of the working class. If they did, more people would hear about me. The only way that they could stop me was to issue a court order based on baseless charges.
10. The Islamic Republic has been doing this for the past thirty years. No person who has been detained by the Ministry of Intelligence has been released without being charged with something unrelated to their activities. In the early years of the Revolution they charged people with illicit sexual relations, drinking alcohol or carrying arms. After a while, these accusations no longer worked, so they began leveling other charges, such as kidnapping and armed operations. I never served in the military and I have no idea how to use a weapon. How could I have been involved in armed operations?
11. The Islamic Republic levels these charges in order to be able to hand down stiff sentences. Human rights activists in Iran such as Saeed Habibi, Sepehr Atefi, Hesam Missaghi, Shiva Nazar Ahari and Navid Khanjani are simply working on human rights issues. But they link all of them to opposition groups with armed wings operating outside of Iran. Why do they do this? Just so they can hand down tough sentences.
12. The Islamic Republic is obsessed with conspiracy theories, and it makes false accusations based on them. The Islamic Republic always believes that any independent civil organization or movement must be linked to foreigners. This is not true at all. Students for Freedom and Equality clearly grew out of Iran's social conflict. The actions of the student movement have shown this. They were neither linked to nor guided by anyone. They stood up for what they believed was good for society.

My Arrest

13. Before January 2008, I had never been arrested. In January 2008, I was arrested by the Ministry of Intelligence held in Qazvin Chobindar, Evin and Ghezal Hesar prisons for five months. I was ultimately released in June 2008.
14. We planned to organize an event on December 7, 2007 but the government started taking action on December 4 against us. It was so important for the government to stop this event that it even made arrests in the courtyard of University of Tehran's campus. Yasser Pirhayati, Majid Akbarnejad, Peyman Piran and Rouzbeh Safshekan were arrested along with many others. They arrested a number of us because of the event. Saadi Ebrahim Habibi, Behrouz Karimzadeh, and Mehdi Geraei Lou were among those arrested. They were arrested two days before the event was scheduled to take place.
15. On that day(December 4) I was able to escape. I changed my clothes. My friend was waiting for me in his car. I quickly got into his car and we were able to escape. But they arrested me about forty days later in mid January 2008.
16. This was how I was arrested: someone walked over to me in our alley and asked, "Are you Ali?" I said yes. He asked, "Ali Kantoori?" I said, "Yes, that's me." I didn't know anything. He said, "Please get into the car." He showed me a warrant they had for me, which authorized them to shoot. They had several cars. They put me in a Peugeot 206. Our car was followed by two or three cars, which showed that they had a complete team. They were all in plainclothes, and the cars had regular tags. They took me to Qazvin's Choubindar Prison.
17. After one day, they transferred me to Ward 209 of Evin prison. First, they gave me my blindfolds. I went into a room and put on prison clothes. They took my picture. Then I put on my blindfold again and I was taken to the medical facility. They took my blood pressure and ran some tests. Then I was sent downstairs – I mean, the guard who was taking me told me that he was taking me downstairs. Someone said, "Who's Ali Kantoori?" I said that I was. He said, "Come here." He was an interrogator from the Ministry of Intelligence. He asked if I had participated in the December 4th event. I said yes. I signed and left.

Mistreatment and Torture

18. As soon as I came out, and before I was arraigned, four or five people started beating me. I was blindfolded, so I couldn't tell exactly how many they were. I don't know how long it lasted. Maybe it took half an hour. My rib was hurt, though it was not broken. Still, it was very painful. I went into my cell.
19. The interrogations started the next day. I was charged with propaganda against the Islamic Republic, conspiracy against the Islamic Republic and acting against national security. But I was also charged with kidnapping, and this became a basis for questioning the activities of student movements.

20. I don't know any of the names of my interrogators. Over there, everyone is called *Haji*, and if they use a name it is a pseudonym. The team that interrogated me consisted of four people. Two of them played "good *Haji*" and "bad *Haji*" roles. The first one would beat me and the second one would give his word to the first one that I would cooperate. Then the second one would say, "Accept your charges and write it down. Rest assured that nothing will happen to you." Those four guys would change occasionally, but the person who took my signatures remained the same.
21. Let me tell you about the difficult aspects of it. Interrogations took a very long time, sometimes from morning to night. I wasn't given any food. These were the kind of questions they asked: "Who guides you?", "What is your movement?", "Who tells you what to do?", or they would ask whether I was a member of a particular group. I don't remember all of the questions they asked me because they were unrelated to my activities and I can't remember them now.
22. Long interrogation hours, physical abuse, and hard verbal humiliation were difficult aspects of interrogation. The worst, however, was psychological abuse, which targeted my identity and my family.
23. I was in solitary confinement for twenty five days in Evin Prison (in early March). I was completely cut off from the outside world. After a while in solitary confinement, they informed me that my mother was doing well, and that, in fact, she was at the prison. At that point I would have given anything to see my mother for a minute. After a while, they allowed me to make phone calls and have visitors. My family came to Tehran from Qazvin every week in order to see me.
24. One day my family didn't show up for the weekly visit. I was continuously worried about what might have happened, but in fact, the roads were closed due to snow. That night, they put a lot of psychological pressure on me. They said, "It's not a big deal. Your mother is doing ok. It wasn't anything serious." I am giving you this example to show how a small thing could have been very difficult for me. My younger brother, Abolfazl Kantoori, is a renowned *karateka*.¹ He is the runner-up in world club championships. They continuously called him to harass him using very offensive words, and put pressure on him because he spoke publicly about my arrest.
25. One thing that was common in prison was the use of electric batons, though they did not beat me with electric batons that often. For the most part they used their hands to beat me because my interrogator was a well-built guy. He used his large physique to intimidate me. He had a ring on his little finger. He would give his ring to me and he would tell me to put it on my large finger. The ring was too big for my finger, and it would fall off. Then he would say, "This is my hand. Now are you going to talk or not?" This is how they exerted psychological pressure.
26. When they were tired of beating me, they would intimidate me and say, "Dear Ali, do you think we killed Pouyandeh and Mokhtari? Do you think we were responsible for

¹ A *karateka* is a person who practices the martial art of karate.

serial murders? Yes, we admit to it. Now, you're in our hands. Are you going to sign what we tell you or not? You're not more important than them, are you?" Or he would say, "A president of a country is asleep, and a cat moves and makes a vase fall on the president's head. The president dies. That's not the work of the Ministry of Intelligence... or is it? Or a political activist is struck by a car and dies. It's not the work of the Ministry of Intelligence... or is it?"

27. One of the worst things was when they beat my friends in front of me. They beat the persons with whom I had worked side-by-side, without expecting anything in return. People alongside whom I had fought for what I believed. People who I respected. That was the worst thing. They would put me next to one of my friends, and they would beat him. I was not blindfolded; I could see. I would ask, "Why have you brought me here?" They would say, "He is not talking." The thing that bothered me the most was psychological pressure, not physical beatings. Even now, talking to you, I feel pain in my head.
28. Beatings, long interrogations, humiliation of prisoners, harassing families when they come to visit, solitary confinement and blindfolds: these are among the difficulties one faces in prison.
29. During those twenty five days, I was interrogated and then returned to my cell in solitary confinement. When I was under a lot of pressure in Ward 209, they got my signature for the accusations. In other words, they got an "okay" from me. But since the Ministry of Intelligence does not have judicial powers, confessions have to be made in a court.
30. After twenty five days, I was taken to a two-person cell [in early March 2008]. They didn't tell me why they took me out of solitary confinement, but when I came out they told me that they had let me out due to their kindness. After that I was transferred to another solitary cell but there were two persons in the cell. I was there for two months. Two times my cellmates changed during that time.

Transfer to Ghezel Hesar

31. I was transferred to Ghezel Hesar Prison two or three days before Nowruz. After arrival, I was quarantined for two days. After the quarantine, I went to *Andarzagah*² number 3, hall 5. There were twenty eight rooms there, each about 6 meters square. There were about ten people in each room.
32. The interrogations did not change and continued as before there. I went through three harsh interrogations there. They were pressuring me so I would accept the charges. That would enable them to justify the sentence they were going to give me. Therefore, I strongly resisted accepting the charges. The interrogator's pre-condition was that I accept their accusations. He said that if I accepted the charges, I would be able to join my

² Literally translated, *Andarzagah* means "a place for guidance." It is a name given to some prison wards in Iran.

family for Nowruz and if not, I would be sent somewhere where I'd learn a lesson. At that time, I did not know what they wanted to do with me. Nonetheless, I strongly rejected all the charges they brought against me.

33. Ghezel Hesar had lots of problems. One of the problems was lice. This was very annoying. Despite the fact that I paid attention to my personal hygiene, I eventually got lice. I washed my clothes in cold water every day. Lice usually nest on the rim of clothes and cause severe itching and wounds. Ghezel Hesar had four or five showers for more than 200 prisoners. According to the prison officials, we could shower for three minutes once every other day. But due to the large number of prisoners we could barely take a shower once a week. And we had hot water only between 6 pm and 9 pm. In the restrooms and other places there was only cold water. There was no heating or air conditioning, which meant that it was hot during summer and cold during winter. I saw six or seven drug addicts faint. Nobody helped them. They said, "They're gonna be ok."
34. The food had some variety. They gave us *ghormeh sabzi* and *khoresh karafs*, none of which tasted like it should. The celery in their *khoresh karafs* was like tree bark, and it had no meat in it. Instead of meat they gave us soy meat, the likes of which I had only seen in animal feed factories. They also gave us tea. They gave each room two flasks of tea in the morning, and two flasks in the evening. This meant one low-quality glass of tea. The food was horrible. I lost 15 kilos while I was there. Ghezel Hesar is a strange prison.
35. I also coughed for a month and a half, after which they took me to see a doctor [in Ghezel Hesar]. My lung had been damaged. I also suffered psychological damage, for which I am currently taking anti-depressants and anti-anxiety pills. Regarding medical problems, each hall was allowed to send five people to the prison medical facility in a week. The person in charge of the medical facility had the discretion to choose those people. They didn't have enough medicine, and health services were scarce.
36. There was also a gym and a library in Ghezel Hesar. But only the bullies and those who had good relations with prison staff were able to use them. The prisoners started to treat me differently after they realized I was a political prisoner. Sometimes I engaged in political discussions with them, which were usually one-sided. Once I spoke about religious ideology. Two or three hours later, security officers came and asked about the discussions. But the prisoners did not name me.
37. There were a number of gas burners in the prison. If you had money, you could buy some food at the prison shop, and then if you bribed the ward rep³ with two or three packs of cigarettes, he would let you use the burners. He probably gave the cigarettes to the guards.

³ A ward rep is a person typically chosen from the prisoners. This person is supposed to represent the prisoners in his ward.

38. Another problem was the guards' mistreatment of the prisoners. They counted us twice every day, and we had to sit in a kneeling position during the count. It took between twenty and forty minutes for the guards to count us.

Release and Trial

39. I was in Ghezel Hessar for three months and released in June 2008. While in there, I was taken to court. On that day, my bail was set at 150 million Tomans. I got released in June 2008 under bail.

40. After my release, I saw the judge five times. His name was Salavati. After five times, he transferred my case to Sanandaj⁴. In Sanandaj, my case went to the second branch of the Revolutionary Court and the 104th branch of the General Court. They had sent my case to the General Court so that they could claim I was an ordinary criminal.

41. The judge did not ask specific questions. He said, "These are what you have been charged with" he read my charges and asked, "Do you agree with these charges?" I replied that I did not. Then he said, "Ok." My case was not based on real allegations, so the judge couldn't really say that much. It was more of a formality. In my trial, I denied the accusations, and I told them that if they claim I had done these things, then they should present their evidence and convict me. They needed me to agree to the charges, and I didn't.

42. One of my trial sessions was on June 10, 2009, two days before the election. I was advocating for a boycott of the election. I think they arrested and detained me that day to stop me from my political activism. I was handcuffed and shackled all day in detention.

43. My next trial session was in the midst of post-election turmoil and arrests. There were only two days between my last two trial sessions. Those sessions took place in August 2009. I must say that at my trial sessions, I was wearing ordinary clothes because by that time, I was free on bail.

44. One week before my last trial, they took my brother hostage and threatened that they were going to hold him if I didn't appear at my trial. Although I was in hiding for 10 days, I eventually went to my trial. My brother, Abolfazl Kantoori, was released on 30 million tomans bail, even though he was not charged with anything.

45. My attorneys were informed of my sentences after the election. The Second Branch of Sanandaj Revolutionary Court had sentenced me to thirty two months of imprisonment, which was later reduced to four months by the Appeals Court. The 104 Branch of Sanandaj General Court issued a sentence of 15 years imprisonment.

46. To sentence a defendant charged with serious crimes, a judge must have credible evidence. My judge [at 104 branch of Santander General Court], however, had no

⁴ Saanadaj is the capital of the Kurdistan province in Iran. It is the second largest city in the west of Iran.

evidence or testimony against me for the fifteen year sentence, except his own personal knowledge.⁵ I have documents to prove this fact. The person who had been kidnapped was brought in, and he said that he had never seen me. The fifteen year sentence was based on a frivolous charge.

47. I was involved with NGOs. I was a member of Students for Freedom and Equality. Acting against national security, propaganda and conspiracy were the charges that the Islamic Republic leveled against me and my friends. I was imprisoned for these accusations.

Flight from Iran

48. I left Iran in mid-March 2010. I left because the fifteen year sentence was handed down immediately after the thirty two month sentence had been reduced to four months. I consulted with my friends about what I should do next. All my friends suggested that I leave Iran, but I decided to stay. My rationale for staying was as follows: I had a thirty two month sentence, five months of which I had already served after being arrested. Moreover, each day in solitary confinement counts as three days. This meant that my sentence would be reduced to about two years. In an authoritarian country, any person who sets goals for his or her civil or political activities accepts the risk of being imprisoned and all the awful things that go with it.

49. I had made plans for my time in prison. At that time, I felt that my English was not good, and I could work on it while in prison. I also could read a number of classics that I had not yet read. But the fifteen year sentence made me lose my concentration. I had no guarantees for my life or safety. Then, I was informed that the trial court had issued an order which put my sentence into effect.

50. Being imprisoned was not very important to me, but my life was threatened. I didn't think I would survive prison. I left Iran a few days before Nowruz 2010. I was prohibited from leaving Iran. I was in the mountains for a week. I was taken to a place that was 500 miles away from the Turkish border. They told me that I was on my own, and that I should cross the border by myself. They came and picked me up when I was two kilometers inside Turkey.

51. I feel a lot of distress when I remember these things.

⁵ According to the Islamic Penal Code, which is in effect in Iran, in a number of situations a judge can rely on his own knowledge and understanding for his rulings.