



**Witness Statement of Ehsan\***

**Name:** Ehsan  
**Place of Birth:** Tehran, Iran  
**Date of Birth:** 1981  
**Occupation:** Cultural Affairs/Translator

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**Interviewing Organization:** Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

**Date of Interview:** June 20, 2013

**Interviewer:** IHRDC Staff

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This statement was prepared pursuant to an interview with Ehsan. It was approved by Ehsan on September 28, 2013. There are 37 paragraphs in the statement.

The views and opinions of the witness expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center.

\* The last name of the witness has been withheld for his protection.

## Statement

### Background

1. My name is Ehsan. I was born in 1981 in Tehran, and I am gay.
2. Early on, in the first or second grade, I felt that I was different. I thought it had something to do with childhood and that it would pass as I grew up. I thought that I would eventually grow up to be like my older brother, but as more time passed I realized these feelings were becoming stronger and settling in deeper.
3. If I were to divide my experiences as a homosexual in Iran into two categories of social problems and issues with the Iranian government, I must admit that for us homosexuals, social issues are more of a problem than our challenges with the government. By social I mean our families, as well as the society as a whole.
4. Up until the last day I was in Iran, I could not imagine that I could have told my family that I was gay. I did not have the slightest hope that my family would accept this matter, and naturally, I was concerned about the consequences.
5. Similarly, I could not have talked about this issue with my colleagues, or even close friends. My field of work was in cultural affairs and translation. I always carried this duality and secretiveness within me. Other than one friend, with whom I worked with and who was also gay, I had not told anyone.

### Arrest

6. On March 1, 2011 I was arrested during a political protest, although I was only a bystander.<sup>1</sup> I was on Gandhi Street on my way back from my music class. I saw masses of people rushing towards me. Apparently [the government forces] had attacked the crowd and people were trying to flee. I got caught in the crowd. Those who arrested me were the riot police, who are a mix of uniformed and plainclothes officers. I was put into a police van. At the time of the arrest I did not know where they were taking me because I was blindfolded. After I was released, however, I realized that I had been taken to Shapour Avenue police headquarters.

### Interrogation

7. We were all sitting in one cell in the corner. After the first day, we were called on one by one and taken for interrogation. These were lengthy interrogations because they wanted to determine our political identities and find out if any of the detainees were politically active. They realized I was not part of any campaign, had no political affiliation, was not a journalist, and was not politically involved.

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<sup>1</sup> Protests held on March 1, 2011 in Tehran and other cities were a continuation of protests that followed the disputed June 12, 2009 presidential election in Iran. According to reports, scores of protesters were arrested in Tehran and other cities during March 1, 2011 protests.

8. During interrogations [at the Shapour police division] they were asking me, for instance, who was I getting my political direction from? How did I make money? They asked me to write [on forms] the names of my friends, who they were, what their ideologies were, how they were supported, where they worked, and so on. Also, they asked who had told us to gather at such and such street, who gave us money, [those kind of questions].
9. I had my laptop with me when I was arrested. At that time I had just met my boyfriend and we had taken some pictures together. By day three or four they accessed the data in my computer and found out about my sexual identity. From then on the type of questions changed. First they were respectful and friendly. They asked, for instance, if I had ever seen a psychologist, or if my family was aware of [my orientation]. After a while they became rude and insulting. They said they would arrest my boyfriend and tell my family. The abuse was verbal. They were not rude to me, but they were very stern. "Write! Answer!" they would command.
10. After they realized I was not politically active, and later when they found out that I was gay, the questions were mostly asked verbally. They would ask me, for instance, when did I realize I was gay? Why did I not treat it? With whom have I had sex? The questions were mostly about my thoughts and beliefs. I tried my best to be subtle and cover it up, but they had seen my pictures and had retrieved my text messages from my cell phone. My boyfriend and I used text messages and, of course, all kinds of things were said. They had a print-out of all of this. The authorities told me that the reason they were treating me respectfully was because of my family. They had done their inquiry and found out that our family was cultured and harmless.
11. The interrogator himself did not assault me, but those who lined us up would kick us for the slightest movement. I don't know which organ my interrogator was from, but he told me on the first day that he was an "analyst." and that this was no joke and I could not be evasive with my answers. I think he was from the Intelligence Unit of the police, or from the Ministry of Intelligence itself.
12. They said they would tell my family [that I was gay]; they threatened to arrest my younger brother, disgrace me and my boyfriend, and so on. After five or six days, they realized that I was not political, and, at that time, my case was not a priority for them. So they released me on a 40 million tomans bail.<sup>2</sup>
13. Other than stabbing me with a pen, kicking me, and slapping me on the back of my neck, there was no torture in the classic use of the term My torture was not physical, but emotional. They said, for instance, that they would arrest my boyfriend. They said my mother was trying to find me and that she was miserable. They threatened to arrest my younger brother.

### **Release from Detention**

14. A week after my arrest, when the authorities realized that I was not politically active, I was released. I was never officially charged [with sodomy or other such charges].
15. While detained, I was not allowed to contact my family. After I was released, my family told me they had no idea where I was held. During those five or six days, neither my family nor my boyfriend had any idea about my whereabouts. Later on, the authorities called my family to tell

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<sup>2</sup> According to the exchange rate at the time, the bail was approximately \$35,400

them where I was and the details of the bond that had to be arranged for my release. They hurriedly came and set the bond.

### **Court Summons and Leaving Iran**

16. I believe it was in mid-July [of 2011] when I was summoned to Branch 71 of the Criminal Court in Tehran by a phone call. The authorities contacted me on my mobile phone. They did not send me any papers. They just told me to go on such and such day to the Criminal Court. They did not provide any other information. Because I studied law, I knew very well what was going to happen, so I left Iran immediately.
17. They had gotten my boyfriend's information from me, but they did not have his phone number, so they could not contact him. Once I was summoned to court, my boyfriend and I left Iran and did not wait to see what would happen.
18. If I had gone to court two scenarios were possible: either they wanted to see whether I would appear in court or not, in which case my sexual identity would have been brought up, and I would have been arrested. Or, I would have been given a return date, and I would have been barred from leaving the country. Their goal was to prosecute me, and they wanted to see if I would go to court or not.
19. If I was summoned to the Public and Revolutionary Court, it would have meant that my case was political. But I had been called to the Criminal Court. The Criminal Court deals with issues of sexual indecency, sexual assault, desecration and so on. Therefore, it was clear to me that this was not about political activities. Also, if it was a follow-up on the arrest, I would have been called to Evin, or the Revolutionary Court on Moalem Street. My guess is that being summoned to Branch 71 of the Criminal Court must have been, either directly or indirectly, about me being gay.
20. After I was summoned to court, we hastily tried to find tickets to leave Iran, by air or train, but we could not find any. We managed to leave Iran legally by bus. Luckily we were not on the no-exit list. We left a week after I was called to go to court.
21. My family thought that the basis for my arrest was political. I did not say anything to my family about being summoned by phone to the Criminal Court. They still do not know.

### **Being Gay in Iran**

22. Of course [my boyfriend and I] could not have had a(n) [open] relationship at university. Not having relations with girls in university itself was problematic and raised questions among my classmates. This issue alone was a source of great stress: the fear of university officials or *Herast* office finding out. Such social concerns were always part of my life.
23. Regarding whether my family knew that I was gay, I cannot be certain, but I never told them myself. It is possible that they somehow knew. I am one of three brothers, but the element that linked the other two did not exist in me, because of my homosexuality. Their lifestyle was different. I lived a secretive life, and I could never take my boyfriend home. Because of being gay, my sentiments, relations, and behaviors were different than others in my family.

24. There was also the pressure of marriage from my family. I am now 31 years old, and they kept asking why I was not getting married. They would say, ‘If you get married, it would be like this or that...’ These were nonsensical reasons. In addition to such pressures, there were issues with the regime that ultimately caused me to leave Iran. The government found out that I was gay, and this became an additional concern, that perhaps they would tell my family, or that I would get fired from my job, or arrested and prosecuted. Ultimately, it came to the point that [my boyfriend and I] could no longer live in Iran.

### **Therapy**

25. I found a counselor with whom I spoke with for long hours in therapy sessions about my homosexuality. I was seventeen or eighteen years old at that time. I had finished high school and had just entered university.
26. Before that [therapy], I thought I had a medical condition that would be healed by passage of time, but I realized that this was not the case. And so I became scared and pursued the matter to find a solution, only to realize that there were none.
27. The counselor I mentioned was my professor at university. I was terrified to even bring up the issue [with him] face to face. So one time when he was on a trip outside Iran, I began chatting with him on Yahoo. He asked me to send him my picture so that he could see who I was. I told him that I was his student and sent him my photo. Once he recognized me and trusted me, he explained the issue to me and enlightened me.
28. He told me not to fight it, and that there were many people like me. This professor taught law, but also worked as a family counselor, and knew psychology. We developed a very strong friendship.
29. After I was arrested, I decided that I had to resolve this issue, or I could no longer live in that society. I went to see a very famous psychologist. He asked me about my education, my background, and ultimately told me that there is no need for me to fight this issue and that I should leave Iran if I could, that there was no point in fighting my tendencies.

### **University Years**

30. I was a student at the University of Tehran.
31. I had no connection with others like myself. Eventually, I made friends through the internet, and realized there were many people like me. Eventually, my identity became embedded in me, and from then on I did not feel that I should change myself.
32. My only concern was the consequences of such tendencies, which goes back to the issue of family, university, military service, and so on. These issues sometimes caused me feelings of guilt for being gay. So, my problem was not that I was gay, rather the consequences of what it meant to be a gay person in Iran, and the stigma attached to it. The problems were social consequences, such as isolation, loneliness, and lack of self-confidence. I put a lot of effort into fighting with such issues, but not with being gay.

33. Given that I concealed my homosexuality, and always behaved carefully and conservatively, no one detected that I was gay. At times my uncle, who was five or six years my senior, or my friends, would call me 'sissy' for not playing soccer or not playing with fireworks, or not doing things that boys did. I would say to them that I did not like soccer or something like that. There was never a direct or nasty confrontation.
34. I finished my undergraduate education in law. No one at the university suspected that I was gay, because this fear was always with me and it became stronger as time passed. A child is not concerned about society, but once one reaches a certain age, the [judgment of] society becomes an added pressure.
35. I never revealed my sexual identity to anyone other than the professor mentioned, who was a very trustworthy and respected man, and therefore it never became a problem. But when I entered university I became more fearful, and when I wanted to make friends that fear always held me back.

### **Arriving in Turkey**

36. When we arrived in Turkey, we did not know that there was a United Nations Office where they processed refugee cases. I thought we had to apply through embassies. But I was told by a friend we should go to the United Nations office.
37. First we were in Istanbul, then we proceeded to Ankara to report to the United Nations Office there. I had some savings which I managed to take with me, but the uncertainties of the future and not knowing how we would survive was difficult. Once we were processed at the United Nations office and we were officially registered with the administration, we were somewhat comforted. I found a job; I worked and I taught English. I am now resettled in a third country.