



**Witness Statement of Hamid Nasseri Basati**

**Name:** Hamid Nasseri Basati  
**Place of Birth:** Khorramshahr, Iran  
**Year of Birth:** 1969  
**Occupation:** Self-employed

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

**Date of Interview:** August 26, 2013

**Interviewer:** IHRDC Staff

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This statement was prepared pursuant to an interview with Hamid Nasseri Basati. It was approved by Hamid Nasseri Basati on May 22, 2014. There are 61 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.

## Statement

### Background

1. I am is Hamid Nasseri Basati, the son of Soheil. I was born in 1969 in Khorramshahr, Iran. I studied at Payam Noor University in Ahvaz, where I obtained my associate degree.
2. For a while, I worked for a commercial company in Qatar. Prior to leaving Iran, I was involved in commercial transactions, both buying and selling. For a while, I also had a shop in the Ahvaz bazaar. I was never allowed [to work at institutions in Iran]. I passed the health insurance employment examination, but they didn't permit me to work [in the field] because my conversion [from Shi'a to Sunni Islam] in the early 1990s was on my record. I was also admitted to Ahvaz [Haft Tapeh] Sugarcane Corporation, but there, too, I was denied employment.<sup>1</sup>
3. On August 3, 2006 I was arrested by [Ministry of Intelligence] officials of the Islamic Republic while passing through Kooy-e Modarres Avenue in the Kut Abdollah neighborhood in Ahvaz. I was released on bail after spending four months at a detention center. A year later, on July 19, 2007, they arrested me once again at the entrance of the Khuzestan [Province] Prosecutor's Office or Branch 5 of the Revolutionary Court. I was once again released on bail after spending forty days at the [Ministry of Intelligence] detention center.

### Conversion from Shi'a Islam to Sunni Islam

4. I have been living under surveillance since 1997 due to my religious conversion. At age sixteen I set out to learn the Quran as well as Sunni and Shi'a religious texts. Later on, at age eighteen or nineteen, once fully convinced, I reached the conclusion that the Shi'a sect is not an authentic ideology. I do not intend to insult the ideologies of others, but in my opinion... that which is in harmony with the Quran, the tradition of the Prophet of Islam and the ideology of the Ahl al-Bayt, is the Sunni tradition.<sup>2</sup> [For this reason] I converted to the Sunni school of Islam, and have held on to this belief [ever since].
5. My religious conversion had absolutely nothing to do with the political conditions of the country. I [reached this conclusion] upon being fully convinced, and [this issue] had nothing to do with the ethnic and political issues, though it cannot be denied that the existence of the Islamic Republic and the circumstances which it has brought about as well as the lies it has perpetuated and the political, economic, and even social corruption it has [brought about] have caused many people to change their ideology. The government under *Velayat-e Faqih*<sup>3</sup> is a symbolic representation of

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<sup>1</sup> The Haft Tapeh Sugarcane Corporation is situated 100 kilometers to the north of Ahvaz. This state-owned corporation began its operations in 1961, and it was the first corporation that produced sugar from sugarcane in Iran.

<sup>2</sup> Ahl al-Bayt is a phrase used to describe the family of Prophet Mohammad, particularly his daughter Fatimah, her husband Ali, and their descendants.

<sup>3</sup> A political theory in contemporary Shi'a Islam which holds that one senior religious figure or a council of several must exercise custodianship over the government. One version of this concept, *velayat-e faqih motlagh*, was proposed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in the years preceding the Revolution of 1978-79. In the context of Iran, guardianship of the jurist is often referred to

the Shi'a tradition [for the public]. For this reason, when many people view the symbol of a religion and its ideological principles as such, they decide to change their religion. In my case, however, my religious conversion took place gradually and over many years. I changed my religion only after obtaining the answers to all my doubts and questions.

6. Some Shi'a clerics insult and curse the Rashidun Caliphs, who are Arabs.<sup>4</sup> This causes some Arabs to react. People feel that one should not insult the Rashidun Caliphs and the Sahabah.<sup>5</sup> This issue offends Arabs [in Iran], and they take issue with it.
7. Once I chose to convert, I also invited my family to do the same. I was not yet married at the time. I married at the age of twenty-four or twenty-five. I have four sisters and one brother; there are six siblings in total. Once I was married, my wife also changed her religion after being fully convinced. After a while, some of my friends from university and school also converted.

### **Migration from Khorramshahr to Ahvaz**

8. I am originally from Khorramshahr. I resided on Minoo Island. After the Iran-Iraq War my family migrated from Khorramshahr to Ahvaz. For about two years, [my family] resided at Mollasani or Kooy-e Bavi – which is twenty-five or thirty kilometers from Ahvaz – and then migrated to Ahvaz. My father was an employee of the Ministry of Education. I resided in Ahvaz until 2005-2006, though I later moved because of pressure from the security services. I had many visits with groups who advised me that [the security apparatus] might take action to arrest me. A group of my friends had already been detained and interrogated. [It appeared that the security forces] were seeking to gather information on me. [At that time] a person named Hossein, who had previously been arrested, visited me upon being released and started advising me. He advised me to flee [Ahvaz] and conceal my residence. For this reason, I migrated from Ahvaz to Mahshahr with my family.
9. When we moved we kept a low profile, and until the time of my arrest, no one - except for my family - knew where I was. My friends from school, university, and my time serving in the military had no knowledge of my place of residence. [Although at that time] I frequented my father's residence in Ahvaz and would see friends there. I didn't go into hiding altogether, but I did keep my place of residence secret.

### **Religious Activity**

10. [At that juncture] I had made a name for myself. A number of political individuals contacted and invite me to participate in political activities, but I did not believe in that approach. [At that time] the *Lajnat al-Wefagh* [and] the Islamic Reconciliation Party had been organized in Ahvaz, and [for this reason] many people asked me to get involved in political affairs. I was concerned about mixing religion with politics, so I rejected the offer.

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as "rule by the jurisprudent," or "rule of the Islamic jurist." The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran follows this proposal in its creation of the office of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, which is currently held by Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. For Khomeini's treatise on velayat-e faqih motlaagh, see <http://www.al-islam.org/islamic-government-governance-of-jurist-imam-khomeini>.

<sup>4</sup> The term Rashidun means "the rightly guided." The Rashidun Caliphs refers to the first four caliphs succeeding Prophet Mohammad: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali. Shi'a Muslims believe that Ali was Prophet Mohammad's rightful successor, and therefore they do not revere the first three caliphs.

<sup>5</sup> The term Sahabah, or companions, refers to the early disciples of Prophet Mohammad.

11. In Ahvaz I had essentially turned into an “inviter” [of Shi’a Muslims to the Sunni sect]. People would come and ask me about religious issues, jurisprudence, interpretation [of religious texts], and whatever else I knew. Those who harbored doubts would share them with me and I would respond to them. This caused some people to send reports to the Ministry of Intelligence. For instance, at the gatherings I attended as a guest, when asked by people about the manner of my conversion or the issues of contention between the Shi’a and Sunni Muslims, I would answer them and they would go silent. It is possible that they passed on reports to the Ministry of Intelligence. These reports had accumulated until 2006, when they arrested me.

## Arrest

12. [At that time] my father was building his house in Kooy-e Farhangian through the [Housing] Cooperative of the Ministry of Education of District Three [of the City of Ahvaz], and [at the same time] looking for a residential place to rent in the Yousefi or Fatemia neighborhoods in Ahvaz. Apparently the landlord of my parents’ [temporary] residence wanted the residence back, and decided to evict them. My father, who was a seventy-year-old man at the time, did not have much strength and asked me to look for a place for them. For this reason, I went to Ahvaz from Mahshahr and looked for a suitable place to rent.
13. I remember it being extremely hot during those summer months. I was in Ahvaz for fifteen to seventeen days. The Ministry of Intelligence officials identified my location and discovered my route. One day, someone told me about a house registered with a real estate agency in Islam Abad district, which was more or less suitable for my father.
14. I went to the aforementioned agency around noon but it had already closed. I went from Islam Abad Avenue toward the main road, i.e. the Koot Abdullah Highway. I hitched a ride in a cream-colored car. I specifically remember it being a personal vehicle [as opposed to State-owned]. It passed a few neighborhoods before reaching Kooy-e Modarres or Khorroosi. I asked the driver to stop, because [I wanted to visit some of the real estate agencies there]. It was a good residential district and the conditions were suitable. I got off on the main avenue, Kooy-e Modarres, and walked toward the real estate agency, which belonged to a person named Hazbavi.
15. I went up the elevated staircase and realized it was locked, so I returned. At exactly the same moment that I was coming down the stairs, a dark green Peugeot RD speedily stopped right in front of me. Two strong, heavy-built individuals got off and started yelling, “Catch this son of a bitch.” I said, “Who are you referring to?” I intended to run away to the desert on my right hand side, but then I suddenly noticed an AK-47 and several magazines in the car. I said to myself, “If I flee, they will catch me.” So I surrendered instead.
16. The car did not have any official tag or designation. The people [in the car] were in civilian clothes. They arrested me and put me in the car. One of them then said to me, “Put your head on my leg.” I said, “Who are you, and who are you looking for?” In response, they asked, “Are you not [Hamid Nasseri Basati]?” I said, “Yes, I am.” I said, “At least show me the arrest warrant.” They replied that they had received it from a judge. Of course they didn’t show it to me. They also said, “Agents from the Ministry of Intelligence have raided your home. Where is your place? We know your house is in Mahshahr.” I said, “Let them raid my home. It’s not important, because I don’t have anything.” They said, “We’ll see about that!”

17. At the same time, my father's home was also searched. The officials who were conducting the arrests said they were from the Islamic Republic of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. I remember them specifically saying, "You should know that the Ministry of Intelligence of the Islamic Republic is extremely strong." I said, "Let it be strong. What have I done?" They said, "Don't you know why you've been arrested?" I said, "Yes I know, it's because of my affiliation with the Sunni tradition." After that they didn't say anything and transferred me to the office of the Khuzestan Province branch of the Ministry of Intelligence in Ahvaz. [I later discovered] they were officials from the Ahvaz Ministry of Intelligence office, who - in coordination with the Mahshahr Ministry of Intelligence office - carried out [my arrest and the search of my home in Mahshahr].
18. In a phone conversation with my family, which took place with the permission of the Ministry of Intelligence after a week [of detention], they also confirmed that Ministry of Intelligence authorities had raided our home and insulted our Sunni beliefs. My wife stood up to them and said, "You do not have the right to enter our home, nor do you have the right to insult our religion." Apparently there was a woman among the officials too. My wife said, "Let me put on my hijab," and she did. The officials then confiscated our family photo albums, which contained pictures of my wedding, military service, school, and so forth, along with all of my Sunni-related religious books in Arabic that they found in my personal library.
19. I had actually purchased some of these books, such as *Sahih Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*, from Qom. They also took our address books. Of course we didn't have anything unusual in the house. Nevertheless, they took my wife's passport, our birth certificates, national identification cards, and some other documents. They were aware that I was not engaged in any activity, political or otherwise. They threatened my son because he also stood up to them. My son said, "You have no right to take our family photo albums. They contain my mother's pictures." He [my son] then took the albums away from them. My son was twelve-years-old at the time. Nonetheless they threatened him and said, "You are older than [12]." They wanted to take him away too, but they didn't. They also took books that I had in [redacted].

### Interrogations

20. I was arrested on Thursday, August 3, 2006. I remember my interrogations started on that same afternoon. [The interrogations] covered my friends, my trips abroad, my beliefs, and the manner of my religious conversion. All questions were related to my beliefs, yet the interrogators kept repeating that they didn't care about my beliefs. I would say, "If that's the case, then why have you brought me here?" They would say, "You have organized an association." I would say, "What is the name of this group I have organized?" Their statements were false.
21. They said that they did not bother Sunnis, but that they were combating Wahhabism. They would say, "You are a Wahhabi." I would respond, "Wahhabism is not a Sunni school." The Sunnis have four schools: Shafi'i, Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali. Article 23 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic guarantees freedom of belief and prohibits inquisition. Moreover, Article 12 of the same constitution affirms that the four Sunnis schools are valid, and [those subscribing to them] have the right to conduct their religious rituals." [Despite these] they were evasive and kept lying.
22. They attacked me several times, so much so that my body was bruised. One time they told me I was a spy. I asked, "For whom do I spy?" In response, they said, "You spy for Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates." When I inquired about the reason for their accusation, they would say,

“Why did you travel to the Emirates?” I would say, “For work, and I went there in a perfectly legal fashion.”

23. I never saw the interrogators, because I was always blindfolded. However, I heard the interrogators say I was being held in cell number three. Additionally, the previous inmates had written on the cell wall that it was room number three. This cell was near the interrogation room. [My location of detention] was essentially in front of a series of other cells. When they sat me down, blindfolded, in the interrogation room, I felt the room wasn't too large. The interrogator would stand behind me, write down his questions, and [put it in front of me]. I had to write down my responses.
24. During my first detention in 2006 I had two interrogators. One of them beat me up while the other interrogated me by posing written questions. Judging by the intensity of the blows by the person beating me up, he appeared to be a heavily-built person. However, the interrogator who interrogated me [seemed to be] a skinny person judging from his voice and his manner of behavior . I also saw his hands, which were slim.
25. During the second interrogation, which took place in 2007, there were various interrogators, but my [specific] interrogator was the head of the Ministry of Intelligence's Chaharshir [Detention Facility].<sup>6</sup> [I know this] because while I had my back to them, I would [often] hear people come and consult with him. They would say to him, “Haji, what should we do about such and such issue and ...” This was the only name I heard from them. He treated me quite nicely. He wouldn't beat me up, and he allowed me to pray at the call for prayers. His style was incentive-based, and it was aimed at convincing me to convert. He was wiser and more mature [than other interrogators.] It is only fair for me to tell the truth and be fair, even if it's in regards to my enemy. I saw nothing but kindness from this person He didn't ask me many questions, and whenever I was tired, he would say, “If you're tired, do not answer!”
26. I was not tortured in 2006, although I was beaten. From the first day until the last, I was interrogated every day based on one issue. It was rare if I could rest for two or three days [without being interrogated]. When four of my friends were detained, they would ask me the same questions they were asking them. One of these friends had written a code on the same chair I sat on for interrogation, which is how I realized they, too, had been detained. Later on, another one of these friends wrote in the bathroom, “I am here [at the detention center.]” Finally, the interrogator also told me my friends were there as well. Usually they take people to get fresh air [in an open-air courtyard], [but] I did not see the sun for sixty days. I don't know whether this was negligence on the part of the officials at the detention center or not. Later on, based on a recommendation made to them, they would take me to get fresh air as well.
27. As far as I remember, [during those sixty days] I told them that I wanted to visit my family. [The interrogators] said, “Write down your request, and it will be submitted to the head of the department. Hopefully they will approve it.” Three days after submitting the visitation request, a prison guard who was at the prison hall came to my cell. He told me I was to be taken to meet my family, but I wasn't allowed to tell them anything about having been physically assaulted or to show them any signs of battery. This took place about sixty days after my arrest. Hoping to see my children, I promised them not to say anything. At the time I had four children [three sons and one daughter].

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<sup>6</sup> The Chaharshir Detention Facility is located at Chaharshir Square in northeastern Ahvaz.

28. [They then] transferred me to Karun Prison in Ahvaz. They asked me to sit by the garden behind the prison. I noticed that all my family members had been brought there. I was so weak that when my children passed by me they didn't recognize who I was. I called them. They came to me and burst into tears. There were two officials present during the entire visit [so] we could not speak openly. Nonetheless, my wife asked me whether they had beaten me. I could not say it, but I showed her a small part of my chest [which was bruised]. So my family figured out I had been beaten. My brother had been released at that time, and had filed a complaint along with my sister. They even went to Ms. Shirin Ebadi in Tehran [to request representation].

### **Court Proceedings**

29. My case continued from 2006 to 2009. There were several judges assigned to the case, including Judge Mahmoudi, then Judge Purmohammadi, who was the head of the Revolutionary Court of Ahvaz, and after him a judge named [Morteza] Torkzadeh, who apparently had ties to the Ministry of Intelligence. He sentenced me to ten years of imprisonment to be served in exile at Masjed Soleyman Prison on charges of "establishing a group aimed at disturbing national security," and "disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic."
30. I was arraigned [two days after] my first arrest, though they simply told me they needed to conduct some investigations on me [because] I had been charged with "establishing a group aimed at disturbing national security" and "disseminating propaganda against the Islamic Republic." The procurator of Branch 5 of the Khuzestan Province Public Court brought these charges against me. His name was [Hojjat al-Islam] Abdol Hamid Amanat Behbahani. He is currently working at another post. At the time, my case had not [yet] been transferred to the Revolutionary Court.
31. I had the right to counsel [so] they sent me a letter regarding legal representation [during the time] of my interrogations. I am still in possession of that letter. The attorney assigned by my family, however, was not very suitable and would take advantage of people. This attorney knew me and intended to use this opportunity to take advantage of me and take money from my family. In practice, he couldn't do anything. Afterwards, Ministry of Intelligence officials told us that it was best if I didn't have an attorney. They said, "All lawyers lie and they can't do anything for you." [Therefore] I dismissed my attorney, and I still have the letter to show it.
32. At that time, Ms. Ebadi had returned to Iran, but she advised my family that it would be best if she didn't take my case, because her presence would exacerbate the situation. My brother eventually obtained a lawyer prior to my release from prison. His name was Mr. Abdolwahhab Neysi. His attorney's fee at the time was 2.5 million toumans.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, he was not able to do anything for me. He was only able to open a bank account for me.
33. My case took about three years and went on from August 2006 to June 2009. I was [first] summoned by Judge Mahmoudi from Branch 2 of the Ahvaz Revolutionary Court. My trial date was set for February 4, 2007. At the end of the court session Judge Mahmoudi announced that he will send the case back to Judge Amanat Behbahani [at the Public Court], because there was no supporting evidence for the charges. He said there should be acceptable grounds for these charges in order for him to commence the trial. He was a fair-minded judge. I was released on a bail of 70

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<sup>7</sup> This amount approximately equals \$2711 per the exchange rate in 2006.

million toumans. This bail was secured by the title deed for a residential house in Ahvaz which belonged to one of my relatives.<sup>8</sup>

## Second Arrest

34. In 2007, I was arrested again. In cooperation with the Ministry of Intelligence, Judge Amanat Behbahani summoned me to court. I went there and was arrested by Intelligence officers right in front of the court gates. I spent forty days at a detention center. I was interrogated in the course of those forty days, though unlike my first arrest the year before, there was no physical abuse involved. The interrogations were less intense and more professional. He [the Haji whom I mentioned earlier] interrogated me for about thirteen days and apparently wasn't able to get any results. Afterwards a group of people who claimed to have come from Tehran interrogated me on the 28<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, and 30<sup>th</sup> days of my detention. I was not blindfolded during the course of this interrogation.
35. They did not mention their names. One of them was short and dark with curly hair and green eyes. He had a wide nose and looked young. I remember he was wearing a gray shirt. The other one appeared to be a 47- or 48-year old man with a red face. His height was average, not too tall and not too short. While this person asked me his questions, a younger one exerted a lot of pressure on me. Nonetheless the truth is that they didn't beat me up, even though they threatened to keep me there as long as I did not confess to spying for Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. I would tell them, "How can I confess to something I have not done?"
36. I spent forty days in solitary confinement at the Ministry of Intelligence detention center at the Chaharshir roundabout. This was the same place I was kept the year before. I constantly heard the sound of airplanes there [and that's how I realized where I was]. After forty days of detention in a solitary cell, they transferred me to the Sepidar Prison, where I stayed for about twelve to fifteen days. I was eventually released on bail of 15 million toumans.<sup>9</sup>

## After Release

37. Upon being released, they summoned again to Branch 5 procurator's office. After appearing at court, I found out that the judge who was assigned to my case, Judge Amanat Behbahani, had been transferred to another branch and replaced by another judge, named Heidari. He was also a cleric, and he was now handling my case. He only asked me two questions and then released me.
38. He told me I was suspected of espionage. [By posing those questions] they added a new charge to my case. In responded that I did not accept the charge. He said fine, and I was free to go. Afterwards Mr. Khani, the Khuzestan Province prosecutor-general at the time, dismissed the aforementioned charge and issued an order not to prosecute. Only my first case, which contained charges of establishing a group aimed at disturbing national security, [and distributing propaganda against the Islamic Republic] remained in place.
39. After my arrest, I stayed in Iran until July 6, 2009. The verdict for my case had been issued in June 2009, and through my attorney I learned that I had been sentenced to ten years in prison. We were very surprised. The last judge of the case, Torkzadeh, was very cruel to us, while the

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<sup>8</sup> This amount approximately equals \$75,922 per the exchange rate in 2006.

<sup>9</sup> This amount approximately equals \$16,042 per the exchange rate in 2007.



previous two judges were fair-minded and continued to delay issuing a verdict. The Ministry of Intelligence put pressure on the [previous] judges to issue a verdict [in line with their objectives], but they did not do it. It was only when Judge Torkzadeh was assigned to the case that the verdict was issued. At this juncture, my case was transferred from the procurator's branch to Branch 1 of the Ahvaz Revolutionary Court. Upon being informed of the verdict my friends and I decided to leave the country.

### **Exit from Iran**

40. [I left the country] on July 6, 2009. One of my friends had gone to the court to exchange the title deed used for my bail [which belonged to him and was now to be used for his own bail] with another title deed. A man named Nasseri, who was Judge Torkzadeh's assistant at Branch 1 of the Ahvaz Revolutionary Court, said to my friend, "There was apparently a verdict issued on your case. I do not have the verdict at this point, and it is [still] in the hands of the judge." [After this interaction] my friend returned to his residence and contacted me [and informed me of what had happened].
41. This was on June 15, 2009, though we do not know the exact date of the verdict. All of these incidents took place in June at the same time as the unrest that followed the ninth presidential elections. In fear of another arrest, I had not appeared for the last hearing held on February 22, 2009, though my friends and my attorney were present. There were no other sessions after that.
42. My friends attended a total of six court sessions, while I attended only two. In some sessions, we were only asked a few questions and then asked to sign a book to prove that we had attended the scheduled court session. After I reached Ahvaz, I contacted my attorney Mr. Abdolwahhab Neysi, and asked him to go to the court to inquire about my case. He promised to do this on the following Sunday. On the day my attorney went to the court, the judge assigned to my case showed him the verdict, but did not provide him with a copy. He said that I had to go to the courthouse in order to receive a copy of my verdict.
43. That evening, my attorney informed me of my sentence: ten years of imprisonment in exile at Masjed Soleyman Prison, which is one of the worst and dirtiest prisons [in Iran]. Many [who are sentenced to prison] are transferred to that prison. My attorney assured me that I had been sentenced to ten years in prison, yet the rest of my friends had been sentenced to five years. About one year after our sentences were issued one of our friends who had converted to Sunni Islam, named [redacted], was added to our case, [raising the number of defendants in the case to five]. He was sentenced to five years of imprisonment.
44. I asked my attorney for guidance, and in response he said I should not expect the sentence to be reduced, but that we must file an appeal at any rate. We did so the next day. The idea was to file the appeal as soon as possible so that we could leave the country. My friends and I gathered together to discuss our options.
45. In the meeting [which I mentioned earlier] my friends and I reached the conclusion that running away within the country and changing our place of residence [wouldn't make a difference] as there was no way to realistically hide from the Ministry of Intelligence if we wanted to work and live a normal life. [Therefore,] we decided to do what was necessary to leave the country, [including] selling our belongings. For example, friends who had cars sold them. Those who had bail to deal with, reached agreements with the collateral owners to pay off the loan in cash, and so

forth. Attending to these matters took about fifteen to twenty days. At that point I was no longer living at home, as I feared being arrested if I went there.

46. During that period we kept the issued verdicts secret. We didn't even inform those close to us. If the Ministry of Intelligence discovered our whereabouts, they would have set out to arrest us before we were summoned to serve out our sentences. We appealed the verdicts even though we knew that would be ineffective. We [drew up] our itinerary. I had a passport, which contained [residential and employment] permits for Qatar.
47. I was going to leave the country about a year after my first arrest [while my residential permit in Qatar was still valid], but I found out I had been issued a travel ban, and my passport was seized at Shiraz Airport. It was [therefore] difficult to leave with a passport. After that meeting, I never again returned to my residence in Mahshahr and spent nights at my father's place or my friends' residences at different places. I was afraid of being arrested.
48. We prepared for our departure, gathered money from here and there and headed to Tehran. I arrived by plane before everyone else. My friends and their families came later. We did not run into any problems because it was summer time and people were vacationing everywhere. My family and I left Ahvaz to Tehran via plane on an evening flight. In Tehran, we went to the residence of one of my friends. At that time the post-election unrest had quieted down [to some extent]. [We stayed with] friend of ours who lived in Tehran and was originally from Shahrud. He was very hospitable to us.
49. We stayed there for two days. On the third day, when my friends arrived, we decided to leave for Urmia. We had arranged, via a friend who had already made it to Turkey, to provide us the address or the phone number of a smuggler who could get us across the border. He asked us to go to Urmia. We spent two nights in Urmia. On the third day we obtained tickets for our families to go to the city of Van in Turkey. They passed through the border legally with passports, though my wife was asked some questions which seemed normal [and there wasn't a particular problem], such as, "Where are you headed," and "Do you have anyone there." The families left Van for Agri, where another friend, was staying. They rented a place and the families temporarily resided there until we joined them.
50. We departed from Orumiyeh on the third day. We contacted a person named Arash (pseudonym), who was Azeri, and picked us up at one of the roundabouts at the center of Urmia. In Urmia we stayed at a school. In general, during the summer months, it is normal to rent out school classrooms to travelers. [Of course] staying at a school was safer than staying at a hotel, because the *Amaken* supervises hotels.<sup>10</sup> With this man's car, we went to the school where we were staying and took our luggage. Mr. Arash contacted someone who was a Kurd from Orumiyeh, and this person took us with his car to a village. He took us to a place that was the closest point to the Turkish border. [The Kurdish driver] handed us over to another man [who was also Kurdish].
51. We spent the night at his place until morning. He was a negligent person. They were supposed to take us by car. At that time, he took thirty-six \$100 bills from us, back when the exchange rate of dollar was about a 1000 toumans. In other words, this person took 3.6 million toumans (\$3,600) from us to take us by car to the city of Van in Turkey, but this never happened. They lied. We never again saw Arash, and the two Kurdish men were the only people we could deal with. After

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<sup>10</sup> Amaken, or the General Directorate for Supervising Public Premises, is a subdivision of Iranian police and it is charged with monitoring activities in public premises such as shops and restaurants.

having breakfast at the residence [of the second Kurdish man], he informed us that his car had broken down.

52. He could not take us across the border, and we were to leave by horse instead of automobile. We agreed, because we wanted to go across the border in any way possible. We left that village at 11:00 AM. After a while we realized we were not going to get on a horse either. There were three people on horses, who were supposed to give us each a horse. But for a long time they wouldn't let us get on their horses. I gave them some money to purchase some food for us, though we were under the impression that they had brought some food with them. We soon realized, however, that they had only brought some dry cheese for their own consumption.
53. It was about time for the evening prayer when we reached the Turkish border. I told them that the [guard there] could see us and the horses, but they did not accept what I said. We said our prayers there, and apparently the garrison had seen us. There was a passageway there, beyond which there was a shallow river. This river was flowing on Turkish soil and [since it was shallow] it could have been easily passed. [The officials present] at the garrison had apparently seen us and were waiting for us among the trees surrounding the river. We reached the bed of the river around 11:00 PM. [The smugglers] were debating whether to put us in front [while passing the border]. I had hired one of the Kurds to inform me of whatever they were saying. I had paid him fifty dollars. He informed me of what they were debating over and as a result we did not agree to go before the smugglers.
54. Once we passed through the mountain, they got off their horses and moved along toward the river [in front of us] on the same road [from Iran]. [Suddenly] bullets started flying towards us from among the trees along the side of the river. The shots were being fired from the Iran side of the border [the aforementioned garrison belonged to the Iranian police]. Before opening fire they had ordered us to halt [after which] we fled toward the mountain. We thought they had arrested the horse riders. My friend [name redacted] did not come on the route from which we came and was basically diverted [and went toward a different direction]. We were all essentially scattered when they opened fire. My other friend, [name redacted], and I returned to the route from which we had come. We were exhausted and [in those circumstances] it was God's will that we stayed alive. We continued walking even though we were hungry and thirsty. By morning time we reached a spring, had some water, and sat there to rest.
55. [As I stated earlier] we left around 11:00 AM and reached the first Turkish village at 1:30 pm the next afternoon. The horse riders basically found us on day two; we had lost one of us but he turned up four days later. At first, they took us to Yükeskova, or Gawar. We stayed at the residence of one of the smugglers for about sixteen days. We were in a difficult situation and had to pay the landlord for food and showers. [After this long wait] they got another \$600 from us to take us to the city of Van.
56. [Finally] after sixteen or seventeen days, we were able to go to the UNHCR offices (in the city of Van). Until just before the earthquake two years ago [in eastern Turkey], the office [in Van] was open and active, and all [refugees] crossing the border from Iran would go there to file their asylum cases. The date of when we filed our case with the UNHCR office was July 21, 2009. [At that time] our families resided in the city of Agri, which is about four hours from Van. We spent one night at Van with the same smuggler who took us there. He charged us thirty Turkish Liras for that night. The next morning we went to the UNHCR offices, obtained the UN forms, and set out for Agri.

57. One year after the verdict had been issued, they summoned me several times to begin my prison term. The police and Intelligence [officials] inspected my place. My mother and sister resided at my place at the time. It was early morning when the officials raided my home, thinking I was there, and it was only after they realized I really wasn't there that they left. This process was repeated one more time. The second time I was summoned, an official simply showed up at my doorstep and my sister signed the summons letter.
58. A large number of my family and friends, who have recently converted, have been arrested.

### **Sunnis in Khuzestan**

59. The condition of [Sunnis in Khuzestan] is quite bad, and [the government] puts a great deal of pressure on them. For example, it doesn't allow them to conduct even the smallest of worship ceremonies. They do not have a center [mosque] and they cannot even conduct congregational prayer at their own residences. If this were to occur [i.e. a group of people conduct congregation prayer at a person's residence] very soon reports would be sent to the [Ministry of Intelligence office], which would [eventually] lead to the arrest of the host as well as those present at the prayer. These kinds of incidents have occurred. On Eid al-Fitr two years ago, a group of friends conducted the Eid al-Fitr prayer outside the city of Ahvaz [in this fashion] at a garden. The local office of the Ministry of Intelligence – acting on reports by the spies it apparently had among the group – [eventually] set out to arrest all those worshipping.<sup>11</sup> Their congregation's imam, Mr. Abd al-Vahid Beyt Sayyah, who is currently in Turkey, was also arrested. Upon my departure from the country, all friends who were in contact with me, such as [name redacted], were arrested or summoned.
60. [In addition to espionage and Wahhabism] they brought charges such as acting against national security, establishing a group aimed at disrupting national security, and spying for foreigners. The government is under the impression that this [religious] movement will eventually turn into a political movement, and that's why it's afraid. I consider the government's impression to be incorrect, and I've told them [the officials] as much. We do not pursue any political objective. In the course of the few years since our conversion, we have not assembled any party, institution, or center. We lack any kind of media, such as radio and television, and we have not published a book or a journal. Why is the government afraid of us [in the face of these conditions]? [This is while] all media and podiums are in the hands of the government. I told them this fear is unfounded, while about twenty million people [sic] in our country in various border provinces are Sunnis. [In response the officials would say] that Khuzestan should not be Sunni, because its population is primarily Arab, which increases the possibility of contacts with [the Sunni] Arab countries and this issue threatens the national security.
61. In conclusion I must say that the pressure on the Sunnis of Ahwaz [sic], be it economic, security-related or social, is increasing on a daily basis, and I bear witness to the fact that today dozens of people in Ahvaz are held in the detention centers of the Ministry of Intelligence and in Karun and Sepidar prisons in Ahvaz solely for the crime of conversion from Shi'a Islam to Sunni Islam.

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<sup>11</sup> Another similar incident involved the arrest of seven Shi'a to Sunni converts during a congregational prayer in July 2014. To read HRANA's report on this incident click [here](#).