



Witness Statement of Nasrollah (Kourosh) Lahouti Eshkevari

Name: Nasrollah (Kourosh) Lahouti Eshkevari
Place of Birth: Tehran
Date of Birth: 1973
Occupation: Head of Notary Public office

Interviewing Organization: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

Date of Interview: 19 October 2012

Interviewer: IHRDC Staff

This statement was prepared pursuant to an interview with Nasrollah Lahouti Eshkevari. It was approved by Nasrollah Lahouti Eshkevari on January 18, 2013. There are 18 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. My name is Nasrollah (Kourosh) Lahouti Eshkevari. I was born in 1973 in Rasht, Iran into a traditional religious family. My parents were devout Muslims, but they never pushed their children to be religious. My [maternal] great grandfather was Ayatollah Seyyed Muhammad Taqi Eshkevari, who was a '*point of imitation*' [high ranking Islamic cleric] in Najaf. [His son,] my grandfather, was Ayatollah Seyyed Hassan Masoumi Eshkevari, also a '*point of imitation*.' On my father's side, my great grandfather was Hujatoleslam Nasrollah Lahouti. My uncle was Ayatollah Lahouti, who was a prominent figure in the beginning of the revolution, and we were also connected with a number of top individuals in the regime through family relations.
2. In Iran, I was in charge of a Notary Public office and worked within the judicial system. I obtained a bachelor's degree in agricultural engineering, and, at the same time, completed a certification as a registrar.
3. I converted to Christianity in 2007, and, up until now, I am a member of the "Church of Iran" in Rasht under the directorship of Pastor Youcef Naderkhani. While in Iran, owing to my position at work and fear that I would be convicted of apostasy, I was not that involved in church activities. Most of my activities began a few months prior to my leaving Iran, and continued after my departure.
4. Before becoming a Christian, I was a Muslim. My conversion was borne out of unique circumstances, just as conditions and circumstances are particular to each individual who comes to embrace Christ. Prior to that, however, I was a Muslim and believed in Islamic principles, albeit I was not a strict believer. Besides, my work environment required adherence to Islam. None of my family members are Christian.
5. I left Iran legally in September 2011. The reason I left the country was the problems facing the Church of Iran and pressures thereof, as well as the threats I had received. Another reason for my departure was so that I could be more active in the affairs of the church. Presently, I am the official spokesman for the Church of Iran.
6. Owing to the sensitive and public nature of my job in Iran, my departure raised some questions and concerns. Shortly after my appearances in interviews and presence on websites upon leaving the country, my brother, sister, and brother-in-law were summoned to the Intelligence Office [for questioning]. This was an indirect threat to me indicating that they could force me to return to Iran. My family denied having any communications with me, and, as a result, due to fear, discontinued any contact with me, since my brother teaches at the university, my sister has a governmental position, and my brother-in-law worked with me [at the Notary Public office].

Home-based Church

7. The Church of Iran is a home-based church that was established about 20 years ago, and is currently active in most cities in Iran. The church is a branch of the Protestant denomination, but gives its own specialized teachings. The Church of Iran has a membership of

approximately 1,000 people across the country, with the largest cluster, about 600-700, in Rasht. Home-based churches are in fact banned by the government and not officially recognized.

8. I believe our church was named “Church of Iran” for two reasons: one, because its members are of Iranian origin and not of any given ethnic minority groups; and two, in comparison with other Christian and Protestant practices, the Church does not identify itself with any sects, thus, the name was chosen to distinguish it from other sectarian churches.
9. The most prominent member of the Church of Iran is [Pastor] Youcef Nadarkhani, who had to face difficult conditions. He lived through three years in fear of execution, which, ultimately, owing to international pressures and favourable political circumstances in Iran, was suspended. In fact, his [charge of] apostasy was withdrawn, and he had already completed, by his last court date, three years of imprisonment for ‘action against national security.’¹
10. Mr. Nadarkhani was released from prison and continues his religious activities in Rasht. Thankfully, he did not yield [his allegiance to Christianity] and remains in high spirits. Indeed, the concern remains that since the Iranian regime did not succeed in eliminating him by execution, it will resort to other forms of elimination, given that it has a record for doing so in the past in such cases as Rev. Haik, Rev. Soodmand, Rev. Dibaj and a few others.² Perhaps, given the current political vulnerability, the pressures, and the attention [that is focused on Iran], the regime would be reluctant to use such tactics; but the threat remains.
11. After Mr. Nadarkhani, we have Pastor Behnam Irani to Rajae Shahr prison in Karaj who is currently enduring very difficult conditions. He is severely ill, his rights as a prisoner have not been respected, and he has been subjected to harsh treatment. He has been placed in the same ward as [common] criminals. Mr. Alireza Seyedian, a member of the Church of Iran in Tehran, is also imprisoned in Evin Prison and serving a six year term. And there are other members [of the Church of Iran] whose prison sentences have been completed, and who have subsequently been released. Some other members have received conditional sentences, and others received verdicts but did not go to prison and left the country instead. The most recent incident was in Shiraz when the disciplinary authorities raided a gathering and arrested seven people. The authorities subsequently summoned other members [for questioning]. So far, they have detained a male and a female, and told others that they will soon receive a notice to appear. This is the current situation of the Church of Iran. Furthermore, in Tehran and in several other cities, a number of dossiers [on Church members] have been opened, but no verdicts issued.
12. Church meetings are routinely monitored and there is always the possibility of raids by intelligence agents. Members are under surveillance, and many are called, every week or two,

¹ After this interview which was conducted on October 19, 2012, Youcef Nadarkhani was summoned to prison again on December 25, 2012 to serve the remaining 45 days of his sentence. He was given conditional release after 19 days on January 7, 2013.

² Rev. Haik and Rev. Dibaj were attacked and stabbed to death in separate incidents in 1994:
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-mehdi-dibaj-1412186.html>

under various pretexts, to report to the Intelligence Office. Conditions are generally harsh and oppressive.

Education for Christians in Iran

13. A number of small children of the parishioners', including Pastor Nadarkhani's two children, were expelled from school. According to the Constitution, children of religious minorities should be allowed their own [religious study] classes in school, but, regrettably, this law is not respected, nor practiced in Iran. In fact, one of the reasons for Mr. Nadarkhani's arrest was his objection to this policy. The Church of Iran requested the right under the Constitution for Christian children to get their marks for religious study classes from the Church, in lieu of participating in Islamic religion classes. However, not only was the request was denied, the authorities also tightened the rules by stating that if these children did not participate in [Islamic] religion classes, they would be expelled. Initially, the Church took this as a mere warning; but the authorities in fact implemented this [policy]. Consequently, four or five children in primary and middle schools were expelled.
14. These children were expelled through a public circular issued by the Ministry of Education and Training stating concern about children of the converted families who should not be enrolled in schools. At the same time, there was another public circular from the National Registry Office concerning issuance of birth certificates. In the past, Christian families were permitted to choose biblical names for their children. However, at some point, the authorities announced that it will no longer accept any letters [of recommendation] from the Church of Iran, thus closing that door on us and making it impossible to obtain birth certificates for our children with biblical names, or even names that were not so unusual. On these two particular issues, I know for a fact that official circulars were issued. Although these circulars were not made available [to those targeted by the action], they existed, and Pastor Nadarkhani based his grievances on these documents.

Conversion in Iran

15. There has been a substantial increase in the rate of [religious] conversion in Iran. While [Iranian] society remains deeply religious, with tenets of Islamic beliefs playing a major role in people's lives, there is a marked interest in other religions in Iran. This [phenomenon] could have several reasons. One reason is the general disenchantment of people with current religious fundamentalism in Iran. Of course, one can argue the same concern about other religions also! Conversion to Christianity is on the one hand the result of the concentrated efforts of Christian evangelists, and, on the other, a private and personal choice of each individual who comes to embrace Christ. Indeed, the current unpleasant environment created by the theocratic government in Iran is an undeniable factor. That is to say, one of the reasons that people search for another religion, or seek alternative perspectives, could be due to adverse conditions brought about by the dominant theocratic government in the country.
16. According to the Iranian Constitution, religions have a right to practice their tenets. However, a clever—in my opinion—classification has been embedded therein. The assumption of the authorities in drafting the Constitution concerning these religions was based on ethnic religious communities. That is to say, what is officially recognized in Iran [as Christianity] are the Roman Catholic and the Russian Orthodox churches, embraced by the non-Iranian ethnic populations of Iran, such as Armenians, Assyrians, etc. In fact, these groups are ethnic

[as well as religious] minorities in Iran. And, as such, they are permitted to practice, as they will continue to remain an ethnic minority. However, home-based churches such as the Church of Iran cannot be considered an ethnic minority, inasmuch as all its members are Persian speaking and Iranians; 99.5% are Muslim Iranians who converted. Hence, they cannot be considered as an ethnic minority. I believe that the Church of Iran is the true representation of a religious minority in Iran, inasmuch as its members are of Iranian origin, and are in minority. This is the main reason that the government does not consider them official—in fact it does not consider them Christians either—and issues verdicts of apostasy against them.

17. Prior to the last two years, we believed that the [government] pressures on the Church [of Iran] were [part of an attempt] to limit its activities. I am now convinced that the intent of the authorities is to eradicate the Church, i.e. to force Christians to flee, or abandon their faith. There is also the possibility of physical elimination [of Christian converts].
18. The plea of the Church of Iran to the international community is that the issue of religious minorities in Iran be taken very seriously. In my opinion, just as a nuclear Iran is of concern, an Iran in which human rights is violated, particularly with respect to religious minorities and political activists—whose views and opinions are not tolerated—is a cause for grave concern.