



Witness Statement of Saber Kakehassan

Name: Saber Kakehassan
Place of Birth: Orumiyeh, Iran
Date of Birth: August 21, 1980
Occupation: Artist and documentary filmmaker

Interviewing Organization: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

Date of Interview: November 1, 2011

Interviewer: IHRDC Staff

This statement was prepared pursuant to an interview with Saber Kakehassan. It was approved by Saber Kakehassan on May 25, 2012. There are 29 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

1. I am Saber Kakehassan. I was born in Orumiyeh in 1980-81, and I have a high school diploma. Since I was twenty years old, roughly ten years ago, I lived in the Iranian [cities of] Naghadeh and Mahabad. I was involved in cultural and artistic endeavors, [including] artistic work focusing on society. Due to my cultural activities I was arrested in the years of 2003-04 [for one month], 2006 [for one month], 2008 [for one month again], and 2009 [for six months] and spent a total of nine months in prison. I have been in Iraqi Kurdistan for approximately a year and a half.

Cultural and Artistic Activities

2. In Mahabad, I ran an art group called Narin. We gathered together the poets, writers, and artists of the city of Mahabad. I wanted to foster connections between Kurdish artists and the rest of the Iranian people, including the Persian and Balouch populations. We had camps in other counties, and we became further acquainted with the other people of Iran. I did not have a formal education in filmmaking, so I concentrated on research. I was also a host of a program and I spoke with people. A cameraman always accompanied me.
3. After I received my high school diploma, I participated in college entrance examinations. I was in the middle of an exam session when they [government agents] came and took me out of the examination room so that I would not be able to take the test. They told me that I was banned from the social sciences, and then they seized my letter of certification, all of my educational records, and even my military service exemption card. I had been exempted from military service because my father was above the age of sixty.
4. Towards the end [of my time in Iran], I began engaging in political activism, but that wasn't how I started out. In Mahabad, I was mostly interested in cultural and artistic activities, so I was more of a civic activist. I ended up having several conflicts with the Mahabad, Orumiyeh and Tehran offices of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance regarding documentaries that I made about illegal narcotics and sociological issues. Unfortunately, they added political [matters] to my file [of suspected offenses] and forced me to promise to refrain from future activities.

First Arrest

5. In 2003-04, I was shooting footage of a mountain called Targheh in the villages around Bukan. Plainclothes officers arrested me on the charge that I worked for counterrevolutionary television channels. They held me for one month. I did not have a filming license, but I did have a permit for cultural/artistic activity from the National Youth Organization. I referred to the Ministry of Islamic Guidance several times in the interest of securing a filming license, but they did not give me a permit. Their justification [for refusing to grant a permit] was that I could not do this kind of work because I had not gone to college and had no record of a formal education in cinema. This was also the principal reason for my arrest.
6. The cameraman and driver who accompanied us to the filming location were also arrested. Over the course of our one-week detention in Bukan, they were tortured, but then released, whereas I was transferred to Mahabad. Knowing that these two would inform my family [of my whereabouts and condition], my interrogators brought me a cell phone to call my family, but they held a handgun to my head to intimidate and prevent me from mentioning that I had been tortured.

7. I was subjected to torture during that week at the Intelligence Office of Bukan. They poured very cold or very hot water over me and beat me with cables and soldiers' belts. During that week I was interrogated three times. The first two times, I was interrogated by a cleric. The first time I was blindfolded, but the second time I was not, and I recognized his voice as that of my initial interrogator. In the interrogations, they would ask me how many projects I had completed thus far and who was supporting me financially. When they realized I was truly doing this work out of passion, they delivered me to the Intelligence Office in Mahabad.
8. In the Intelligence Office of Mahabad, they [authorities at the Intelligence Office] told me that they had received reports that I was linked to political activists and foreign Kurdish-language television channels. They told me that they had tapped my phone and had recordings of my voice, whereas I had never done such things [as mentioned above]. They held me in Mahabad for 23 days, and then they released me on five million Toumans bail [roughly \$5,000 at the time]. Three days before my release, I was taken to court. The judge there asked me for whom [which country] I was filming footage of the area. I said that I wanted the footage for my personal archives. I did not have an attorney.
9. After three months, I received a call from the court requesting my presence. The judge fined me 500,000 Toumans [about \$500] for filming without a license, and told me that "if you do not have the money to pay this fine, you must go to prison." I did not have the money, but over the next three or four days I managed to borrow the money and deposit it in the account of the judiciary of Mahabad and reclaim the documents I had put up for my bail. They also got me to commit to staying away from filmmaking thereafter.

Second Arrest

10. My next arrest occurred on January 2, 2006. At the time, I was making a documentary on drug use in Mahabad. I wanted to receive financial support from prominent residents and trade unions of the city [in order to] to set up an area with a camp for young heroin addicts wishing to quit.
11. I was arrested as I was visiting expensive shops in the Mahabad city square, like gold and textile merchants. Later on, I learned that Hamed Heydari, a man who owns several cell phone stores, reported me [to the authorities]. At the time, I did not know that he was part of the regime himself. He is currently the head of the Mahabad City Council.
12. On the day of my arrest, I was taken to the Intelligence Office in Mahabad. During the course of my detention, I was blindfolded and subsequently interrogated 5-6 times. At the time, a drug rehabilitation program had been put together by the singer Darius Eghbali. The interrogators alleged that we had received support from this program. They [the interrogators] told me, "We can make camps for addicts ourselves, but the population of Mahabad itself does not merit such an act, because if they [the addicts] quit, they will go and join the *peshmerga* and fight against the Iranian government.
13. The first day of my arrest, they searched our house and took everything that I had in the house, like computer towers, back to the Intelligence Office. I gave them the passwords for many things in my computer, and I saw them easily open these files before my very eyes. I had sent emails to Voice of America, BBC and Kurdish television channels like Roshd TV. They extracted everything from my computer. I created reports about the killings of small-scale cross-border smugglers (*kolbaran*) and the conditions of the Iranian people and had sent them to television channels, and they downloaded those from my computer. I was detained for 27 days under a

charge of illegal activism; half of that time I was in the Intelligence Office of Mahabad, and the other half I was in Mahabad [Central] Prison.

14. On January 26, 2006 they took me to court before Judge Mounesi. This time, I requested an attorney and received a powerful slap from the officer from the Intelligence Office. He said “What’s a lawyer? Why do you want a lawyer? You are your own lawyer, you have to defend yourself.” They told me I had to secure [a deed, or other document representing] 25 million Toumans [about \$25,000] for bail. There was a telephone booth in the hallway of the courthouse and I called my family right there. They came with a 25 million-Touman deed and I was released.
15. Since my activities were not political, in order to secure my acquittal I gave a 300,000 Touman [about \$300 at the time] bribe to a religious leader who was from the Mangor tribe. Of course, they can never have people released outright, but they can use their influence. Ultimately, with his help I was acquitted without having to return to court. The official judgment wherein I was acquitted came to our home and my family went back and retrieved their deed.
16. After my release, from 2006 to 2009, my activism increased, and I struggled [against the regime] more every day. I crossed the border to Iraq and visited the Kurdish television channels there. I continued my activities with a literary magazine based in Erbil [the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan] called *Raman*. Every time that I went to Erbil, I would return to Iran with 300-400 copies of this magazine and send them to universities. It was a free magazine.
17. For fundraising, I would put together a 6-minute clip of local music for [a cost of] around 300-400 Toumans [between roughly \$0.24 to \$0.33 today] and give it to the Kurdish television channels for 1 million to 1.5 million Toumans [approximately \$800 to \$1200]. Sometimes they would even give me more money to allow me to return [home] and prepare new programs which had absolutely no political dimension.

Third Arrest

18. In 2008, as I was returning from Iraqi Kurdistan with equipment in tow, including a camera, microphone, and lighting equipment which had been given to me by my friends in the Kurdistan TV and Zagros television channels to be used in filming new reports, I was arrested at the border by the police of Piranshahr. I did not confess that I had the equipment in order to do work in Iran. Rather, I told them that I was bringing the equipment for sale. In court, the judge sentenced me to three months of imprisonment and fines of one million Toumans [about \$800] for the transport of smuggled goods and 150,000 Toumans [about \$120] for illegally crossing the borders. During this prison sentence, I became acquainted with a prison employee who had been imprisoned himself. He said that if my family were to see so-and-so [he mentioned an individual’s name] he would be able to decrease my sentence. During a prison visit, I told my family about this. They spoke with him and he had my prison sentence vacated and only imposed fines, which I deposited. I was freed after one month of imprisonment in Orumiyeh Central Prison.
19. My final act in Iran was to film a sociological documentary about Kurdish exile [populations]¹ in Northern Iran from Talysh [in Gilan Province] to Mahmoudabad and Kelardasht [both in Mazandaran Province], Qazvin and even Sistan and Baluchistan. The Intelligence Office seized this film from me. They accused me of being a spy and alleged that I worked for foreign

¹ These are tribes that migrated or were forcibly relocated to parts of Northern and Eastern Iran in the 17th-19th centuries. See David McDowall, *A MODERN HISTORY OF THE KURDS* (1996), 270.

governments like the United States, Israel and the Kurdistan [Regional] Government of Iraq, but they had obtained no evidence to support these claims. They had become sensitive to my existence among the Iranian people. One or two of my programs had even been shown by Voice and Visage [the official radio and television channel of the Islamic Republic of Iran, called Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting in English, or IRIB].

Fourth Arrest

20. My next arrest took place in April-May of 2009 in Talysh. [I was] not [arrested] in the county of Talysh itself, but in Rizvanshahr, a city on the way to Talysh. I was with my friends. There were three of us altogether. We were taking pictures of the road sign [leading us to Talysh] when we were arrested by the police on charges of unlicensed photography. They held us in the Rizvanshahr station for five days after which we were freed when one of our friends from Talysh managed to post bail for all three of us [so we were released]. Later on they sent my file to Talysh and they [the authorities in Talysh] discovered that I had [a substantial] record. Consequently my problems increased. They also arrested three of my friends from the north. A week later, I received a call from the police station in Talysh at my home in Mahabad. They told me to go back and retrieve my camera and the rest of my equipment. When I arrived, an Intelligence Ministry officer from the Intelligence Office in Talysh was there. He arrested me on the spot and took me to the Talysh Intelligence Office.
21. The behavior [of the officers] in the Intelligence Office in Talysh was much worse than that of their counterparts in Mahabad and Bukan. They had much more hatred for Kurds. They would say, "You Kurds are murderers and you decapitated our relatives at the beginning of the Revolution." Insults and beatings and death threats were [common]. A few times, they took me, blindfolded, to a gallows that they had built themselves [to simulate executions]. They wanted to scare me into confessing whom I worked for. They had invented some [accusations] and written them down for me: espionage for the American government, filming sensitive military areas and power plants in Rasht and Sari, etc. Since I had taken some pictures with US soldiers in Iraqi Kurdistan and they had found these photographs at my home, they charged me with espionage. They took me to Rasht many times for interrogations. They would put me in a car with a blindfold and drive me around until I told them which places I had filmed. They also threatened to rape me a couple times in an effort to get me to confess. But they never took me to court.

Escape from Iran

22. After being tortured for a period, as it got colder and the ceiling of my cell started to leak and my kidneys began shutting down, on November 18, 2009, they blindfolded me and transferred me to Talysh Hospital. Afterwards they wanted me to post 50 million Toumans bail [about \$50,000]. My family posted bail and I was freed, but my health was still bad and I had to go to doctors and hospitals for some time.
23. My father convinced the guarantor of my bail that if I were to flee, he [my father] would give the guarantor his agricultural land [in place of retrieval of the deed posted as bail]. So I came to Iraqi Kurdistan. They still have not confiscated the land [on the deed that was posted as bail]. My father passed away on March 11, 2011, but before his death he was taken to the Intelligence Offices of Mahabad and Orumiyeh a number of times. His interrogators forced him to get in touch with me and tell me to return to Iran. Twice, my father told me over the phone that he was at the Intelligence Office and had been threatened and compelled to tell me to return to Iran, and

immediately after he said this the line would be disconnected. But the third time that he called, they had put so much pressure on him that he said, "Come back, no one has any problem with you." The next day, he called me with an Irancell [calling] card and told me, "Do not return to Iran under any circumstances, these people [the authorities] are lying. They forced me to say that."

24. After leaving Iran in this involuntary manner, I continued my activities. I send news and reports regarding human rights issues in Kurdistan to several channels. I usually follow up this news with the help of my friends. In addition, I represent the European Organization for Iranian Refugees (EOIR) in Iraq.

Kurdistan and Political Issues

25. When Abdollah Ocalan was arrested in 1999, I was in Piranshahr. At the time, no one knew of him, and satellite television was new to Kurdistan. In this [cultural/political milieu], everyone went out into the streets without knowing who Ocalan was, what he had done, or what ideas or doctrines he espoused. Conflicts between the people and the government forces began in Orumiyeh, where some Kurds from Mahabad and Orumiyeh were killed in front of the Turkish consulate. This caused people to focus more on attacking government buildings. I participated in the Piranshahr protests. In Piranshahr no conflict came to pass between the people and the government forces or the police.
26. Showaneh Ghaderi was killed in the summer of 2005. The previous year, there had been an election in Mahabad and Showaneh had stolen a ballot box. There was a name in the ballot box that had not received any votes from the people. Also, when the police find that an arrestee has smuggled cigarettes in his/her car, they harass that person. In light of these incidents, Showaneh was going to argue with the police. He was also [politically] active as a graffiti artist. We didn't know at the time that certain graffiti were his work, but after he was killed we understood.
27. I have boycotted all elections in Iran. I have never participated in an election. The rest of my family is the same. My identification papers bear no stamp from them [the government].² Government officials often harassed me because of this. During Khatami's first election campaign [in 1997], his advertisements, focusing on freedom and democracy spurred many people to participate. In Kurdistan, many people voted for him. But after the chain murders [mysterious assassinations of political dissidents and journalists from 1998-2001], Khatami and his friends' [the reformists] hands were revealed, [and we learned] that they wanted to get rid of all of the well-known and freedom-loving figures in Iran. Little by little, people started announcing their complete opposition to the Khatami administration.
28. During Ahmadinejad's presidential election [in 2005], in Kurdistan they were saying that Ahmadinejad had a major role in the assassination of Dr. Abdulrahman Ghassemlou. This is why many abstained from voting in the election. In Mahabad, I saw a large billboard about 5-6 meters [in area] on Shahpour Street showing Mr. Karroubi [a reformist candidate in the 2005 and 2009 presidential elections] with Masoud Barzani, the head of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq in order to convince people to participate in the elections. The Islamic Republic's crimes in Kurdistan had caused people to abstain from voting.

² Iranian citizens have their identification papers stamped after voting in each election.

29. Whomever they [the government] arrest on a narcotics charge is interrogated for a day or two for appearances, and then released back onto the streets to start selling narcotics again. Murders of border-dwellers have also increased beyond numbers in previous years and presidential administrations.