



Witness Statement of Shahoo Hosseini

Name: Shahoo Hosseini
Place of Birth: Mahabad, Iran
Date of Birth: August 29, 1973
Occupation: Journalist

Interviewing Organization: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

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Interviewer: IHRDC Staff

This statement was prepared pursuant to an interview with Shahoo Hosseini. It was approved by Shahoo Hosseini on October 20, 2014. There are 50 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 Shahoo Hosseini. I was born on August 29, 1973 in the city of Mahabad. Prior to my departure from Iran, I worked as a teacher for ten years while I was also a graduate student in political science at the Imam Khomeini International University in Qazvin. I had completed all major course requirements and only had to defend my thesis, but unfortunately I was denied the opportunity and was unable to graduate with my degree.
2. On June 13, 2012, I was arrested by [agents of] the Ministry of Intelligence (hereinafter “MOI”) office of the city of Mahabad and was tortured and interrogated for 11 days in the MOI detention center [in Mahabad]. I was subsequently detained in Mahabad Central Prison for 4 days until June 27, 2012, when I was released on bail. As a result of the pressure and threats that followed, which were about to culminate in my second arrest, I was forced to leave Iran on July 20, 2012. I currently live in Germany.

Literary Association of Mahabad

3. I am a journalist and a literary and cultural activist. I have been a member of the Literary Association of Mahabad since 1992, and I was a board member of the Literary Association of Mahabad from 2000 until the fall of 2004, when agents of the MOI office and Basij threw us out of the Literary Association with the force of daggers, bayonets and knives and closed its doors.
4. The Literary Association of Mahabad was established in the late 1980s by a few sympathizers and activists in the cultural sphere such as Mr. Ahmad Bahri, who is the managing editor of the Mahabad monthly magazine, Mr. Mansour Hamed, Mr. Aziz ‘Aali and a few others whose names I can’t remember right now. This Association was registered with the [local] office of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance of Mahabad. In 2000, when I was in charge, with the help of a few friends including Ms. Maryam Qazi and Mr. Qassem Moayedzadeh, for the first time we managed to obtain a Non-Governmental Organization license for the Literary Association. So although our weekly meetings were held in the same building as the [Mahabad] office of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, we were independent and had acquired the license so that we could operate independently as an NGO.
5. The Literary Association of Mahabad worked in accordance with the constitution of Iran and its articles, and its activities were strictly cultural activities. This meant that there were literary gatherings every week and a number of [Kurdish language] poets and writers and critics of Kurdish literature would read poems and stories and then critique and review them.
6. Towards the end of the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, when the reformists’ era was on the wane and during the political transition that resulted in the rise of Mr. Ahmadinejad as president and the head of the executive branch, [the authorities] began to revoke the licenses of independent and nongovernmental organizations. Due to its prominence in the field of Kurdish literature in the Kurdish regions, the regime was more sensitive towards the Literary Association of Mahabad, and in fact it was shut down violently during the fall of 2004.
7. After that the Literary Association stayed closed for a while, but later it resumed its activities and it continues to operate under the supervision of the local office of the Ministry of Culture and

Islamic Guidance. [Later] in early 2012, I was invited to join the Board of Founders of the Literary Association but after I presented my credentials I was disqualified from candidacy in a very strange way. The local office of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance had essentially handpicked [board members] for the Literary Association of Mahabad.

8. My work in journalism began with writing articles for the journal *Makrian*, a student publication at the Islamic Azad University of Mahabad. After that, if I'm not mistaken in 2003 or 2004, I continued my work in journalism as the editor of the political and social section of the weekly magazine *Farda-ye Ma* ["Our Tomorrow"] in Mahabad. Unfortunately this magazine was shut down after three issues.
9. I continued my work in journalism by writing articles for the weekly magazine *Rojhelat* ["East" in Kurdish languages, often used to refer to Iran's Kurdish region in relation to Kurdish regions in neighboring countries], which was published in Sanandaj. In 2006, *Rojhelat* was also banned.
10. Considering how oppressive the atmosphere was, and that the press boom was over by that point because of the [commencement of a] process of media shutdown and intolerance for any voice advocating freedom, in 2006 I started my own weblog and began writing articles in my own blog. Unfortunately my weblog was filtered and shut down last year. Although I started a new blog, the old site is closed. Indeed, the majority of my activities were in journalism, literature, and blogging. The main point of criticism in my writings was aimed at the authoritarian and dictatorial nature of the ruling regime in Iran.

The Imam Khomeini International University in Qazvin

11. In 2006, I was admitted to the political science graduate program of Imam Khomeini International University in Qazvin. I had completed all major course requirements and only had to defend my thesis, but unfortunately I was denied the opportunity and was unable to receive my degree.
12. There were two types of foreign students at the International University in Qazvin. One group was foreign students that were picked by the Islamic Republic regime that included Syrians, Lebanese, Iraqis, and Shi'ites from Pakistan and India. They studied different subjects such as theology and Islamic education, Persian literature, basic science and engineering courses and the humanities, but they were placed there by the regime with specific goals. In reality, the regime brought these students on scholarships from countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and India to nurture them as their own agents and they were generally lazy students who were unqualified for graduate studies, but they were studying there. There were also other students from Bolivia, Italy and China who were there to study Persian Literature.
13. This university had a six-month Persian language training course to teach foreign students how to read and write in Persian. All subjects were taught in Persian at this University.

Academic Conditions for Students in the Kurdish Region

14. From September 2003, I was hired by the Board of Education in Mahabad as a teacher on an hourly contract. In 2009, I was officially hired by the Ministry of Education as a permanent teacher on a trial basis. I taught Persian language and literature in high schools in Mahabad for ten years.

15. In October 2012, the *Gozinesh* [selection committee] of the provincial branch of the Ministry of Education in the province of Western Azerbaijan expelled me in an illegal and political act. But investigating my [alleged] misconduct was not within the jurisdiction of the provincial branch's *herasat*.¹
16. The primary reason for this is that the authority to investigate employee misconduct is the Staff Disciplinary Committee and not the *herasat*. *Herasat* offices in every ministry or institution are offices of the MOI. Hence that agency did not have the jurisdiction to order my expulsion.
17. The second reason is that the charges against me had not yet been proven in any court of law and I was still only accused and had not been convicted. In the meantime, the *herasat* had ruled to expel me based on accusations that had not been proven in any court.
18. Every student has two separate files: academic and non-academic. Students never see the non-academic file and are unaware of its content. But this file is the basis for their future chances in acceptance in universities and employment in government jobs. A report on any given student's personal conduct is recorded in this file.
19. Apart from female students who had to observe a particular dress code, although we were not directly or openly barred from wearing Kurdish clothes, if male students in the Kurdish region wore traditional Kurdish clothes or observed Kurdish traditions it would be recorded in their non-academic files.
20. Of course, if a student wore Kurdish clothes he would immediately be labeled as a separatist or an anarchist in his non-academic file, to which he would have no access but which would cause trouble for him when he applied for university or government jobs. These types of limitations existed in these schools. So indirectly students were advised not to wear Kurdish clothes and to avoid observing cultural traditions. Nobody approached the students directly [to advise this] however. At least in high schools that I taught, I never saw [any teachers or staff] tell a student not to wear Kurdish clothes.
21. Discriminatory orders were definitely sent to schools in the Kurdish regions, but because these were secret directives, they were never shared with teachers or students and only the top tier of administration in schools such as principals or vice-principals were aware of these directives.
22. But one obvious form of discrimination was that students who were members of the Basij enjoyed more privileges than those who were not members of Basij.² One privilege was, and continues to be, that they served a shorter term of military service than those who were not affiliated with the Basij. Compared to those who were not affiliated with Basij, Basij-affiliated

¹ *Herasat* offices can be found in all public institutions in Iran, including in universities and government buildings. They are partly staffed with employees of the MOI and tasked with reporting on possible sources of dissent in public institutions. For the account of one Kurdish university student who faced harassment by *Herasat* officials, see: <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/english/publications/witness-testimony/3372-witness-statement-sabah.html?p=1>. See also <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/08/president-hassan-rouhani/#Abuses>.

² The Basij are an extensive paramilitary organization under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with branches throughout the country, many of which are dedicated specifically to students. Many of its members are known for zealous support of the Supreme Leader and for the role of religion in public life. See http://www.rferl.org/content/Trans_Basij_Force_Mainstay_Of_Domestic_Security/1357081.html.

servicemen are assigned to better and more pleasant responsibilities and locations. The advantages of leave benefits during military service for Basij affiliates are far better than others. Even in university entry exams and placement they are in a much more advantageous position than those who are not members of Basij. Since at the same time membership in the Basij is considered shameful among Kurds, who use a very derogatory term for Basijis, this discrimination has become very pronounced among Kurds.

Arrest

23. The election for the ninth Islamic Consultative Assembly took place in February of 2012. In Mahabad, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the MOI office supported one particular candidate. [The Guardian Council] disqualified one candidate³ that was relatively popular in public opinion at that time and engineered the election in such a way that the name of their favorite candidate who had the support of the IRGC and MOI office would emerge from the ballot box. At that time a group of my friends and I challenged the way they were engineering the process and as a result the name of the winning candidate that emerged from the ballot box was not the one favored by the IRGC and the MOI. He is a member of this current Assembly. In reality our activities resulted in defeat of the candidate that was favored by the IRGC and the MOI. I regard my arrest, which I will now explain, as an act of retaliation by these people [due to the result of the election].
24. About ten days prior to my arrest on June 13, 2012, one evening at 5pm my mobile phone rang and displayed an unidentified number. Everyone knows that these unidentified numbers are specifically from the MOI. When I picked up the phone someone from the other end introduced himself as Hamedi from the Intelligence office of Mahabad and asked me if I had time to go to the Mahabad MOI office that day to answer some questions. The MOI office in Mahabad is located on Farmandari Circle in Chakeh Chekooleh neighborhood.
25. I immediately went to the Intelligence Agency and two people interviewed me on that day. I am not sure if these are their real names or pseudonyms, but one was known as Mr. Hamedi and the other person, who had come to Mahabad from Orumiyeh, introduced himself as Hajj Mehdi Zaffarani. When he spoke one could tell that he clearly had a Turkish accent. I learned later that he has interrogated many Kurdish activists and journalists and is a very brutal and savage torturer. He told me that he was handling my case and invited me to cooperate with them so that they could cooperate with me and not cause any problems for me. I was interrogated for two hours that day. Then they told me I had 10 days to think about cooperating with them.
26. I left the MOI office of Mahabad that day without taking this threat too seriously because I was confident that I had done nothing illegal and there was no need for me to cooperate with the Intelligence Ministry. I was a teacher and a journalist and a critic and if anything I was a public servant in the cultural and social field.
27. On June 12, 2012, one day before my arrest, I had gone back to my university for the last of my final exams. I was on the university campus after the exam when my phone rang showing the same unidentified number. Again this person introduced himself as Mr. Hamdi and told me to go

³ A government institution that vets and often disqualifies candidates for local and national elections. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/03/iran_power/html/guardian_council.stm.

and visit them in the Intelligence Agency of Mahabad the next morning at 8:30 AM to answer some questions and then I would be free to go home.⁴

28. I left Qazvin that same night and arrived in Mahabad at 6 AM and I was at the MOI Office in Mahabad at 8:30. First I waited about ten minutes, and then Hamedei came and handcuffed me and said these same words: "Arrest with warrant." I pulled my arm and asked to see the warrant. Punching, kicking, and slapping me, he said: "Here is the warrant!"
29. Mr. Hamedei of the Intelligence Agency of Mahabad was a relatively tall man of about 5'11", stocky and robust, between 30 - 35 years old. He didn't have a Kurdish or Turkish accent and spoke Persian fluently.

Detention in the Mahabad Ministry of Intelligence Detention Center

30. After that, I was blindfolded and taken by car to the MOI's detention center in Mahabad along with two other people that I didn't know. This detention center is located across from the third brigade army barracks, which is behind the IRGC military base. I was separated [from the other two prisoners] at the detention center. I was taken to a solitary cell. This cell had a carpet and two orange blankets. There was also a radiator for heat. The cell was maybe approximately 5'x8'. Of the five-foot width of the cell, three feet were to sleep on and two feet were for the toilet and bathroom, which was basically only a sink, an ewer and a faucet, and the stench of the toilet was horrendous. There was a small skylight on the ceiling where a fan was working slowly with a grinding sound. There was also a white light bulb that was left on the entire night.
31. One hour after I was taken into this cell, the door opened and I was blindfolded and taken for interrogation. In the interrogation room, someone by the name of Jamali, who declared himself to be the head of the legal department of the Ministry of Intelligence office read my charges and told me that I had been arrested and was being charged for membership in Kurdistan Democratic Party. He had a thin face and was about 5.5 feet. He wore glasses and had stubble.
32. After reading my charges, they took me to another room where there were other MOI officers including Jamali, Hamedei, and Hajj Mehdi Zaffarani. There was a judge from the Revolutionary Court by the name of Zaheri who issued a provisional arrest warrant for me and read my charges, which included membership in the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, assembly and collusion, taking actions against national security, illegally crossing the border, and a series of similar accusations. He asked me if I accepted these accusations. I replied that I denied all of them. Then he put a piece of paper in front of me to sign. It listed all of my charges. I refused to sign, but they kicked and punched me from behind, and [eventually] forced me to sign the document.
33. Then they returned me to the cell. After another half-hour they blindfolded me and took me for interrogation. Even from behind the blindfold I could see that it was a small room with a table and a chair that I was sitting on. My interrogator, Hadj Mehdi Zaffarani was also sitting across from me. He had a huge binder in front of him when he told me, "This is your file, Mr. Hosseini. We started the first page of this file on you in 2000 when you were in charge of the Literary Association. You've been under surveillance since."

⁴ Several former political prisoners indicate that they were detained during the last days of exams before receiving college degrees and even high school diplomas. See witness statement of Yaser Goli, available at: <http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/publications/witness-testimony/1000000118-witness-statement-of-yaser-goli.html>. See also witness testimony of Seif Mohammadi (pseudonym), on file with IHRDC.

34. In my final days in detention, he showed me the file. I noticed that for about 7-8 months, my telephone had been tapped. Then he played a tape of my voice that had been recorded during a university lecture where I had profusely criticized the regime and the quasi-dictatorship of the Supreme Leader and had called the institution of the Supreme Leader a tool of repression in Iran. This was my own voice during one of my professors' classes. He told me that they had six hours of recordings of my voice where I was criticizing the regime in different classes. He said that he had only played a small portion of the recordings so that I could hear myself.
35. During the interrogations I denied any affiliation with the Kurdish parties since I was not affiliated with any of them. Even now I am ready to leave Germany and go back to Iran to be tried in a competent court with a jury in accordance with the provisions of the Iranian Constitution. My detention was illegal from the start. The Revolutionary Court did not have jurisdiction to interfere with my case. According to Article 108 of the Constitution, I should have been tried in a Public Court and not a Revolutionary Court, in public and not in secret, and in the presence of a jury, a lawyer and without being tortured.
36. I was tortured frequently during my 11 days of detention. They would handcuff me and hang me from the ceiling. They would beat me with cables and batons. I was forced to make taped confessions. I had heart disease at that time. I was under medical supervision in Iran and am still under medical supervision here in Germany. Every second of my time in the detention center was filled with stress, tension and anxiety. The only evidence they had for supporting the accusations against me was the confessions that they extracted through torture. They had no other document to convict me. For 11 days I was kept in solitary confinement.
37. A few of my friends had also been arrested while I was detained, including Mr. Diako Khayyat who was a graduate student of Economics at Tehran University; Mr. Ya'qub Khazari who was a graduate student of Psychology at Tabriz University and some other friends who had been arrested at the same time. I was only interrogated by Hajj Mehdi Zaffarani, but later learned that Hamed and Jamali had interrogated my friends.
38. In my last few days in the detention center, Mr. Diako Khayyat and I were cellmates. [The prison authorities] transferred me from solitary confinement to a larger cell where he was also confined. He had been arrested on similar charges.
39. During those 11 days I was only able to see my family once for a few minutes, and had one two-minute phone call with my family.
40. The torture that I endured was both physical and psychological. I lost about 44 pounds during those 11 days. I was subjected to torture because they had written up a list of accusations such as membership in Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, being a spy, etc., that I refused to accept, so they tortured me in order to get me to accept the charges. That's how they obtained a taped confession from me. They gave me a written text that I had to read in front of a camera. They had written the topics and added some explanations. I had to study the material and they would record them piece-by-piece. They would tape a 5-6 minute piece then they would give me another sheet of paper to read and then they would make another tape. All these tapings took place in one day.

41. After 11 days, I was transferred to Mahabad Central Prison. At first, I was sent to Ward 3. This ward had four rooms and inside each room, although there were three-tier bunk beds prisoners also slept on the floor and under the beds. A large group of people even slept in the hallway of the ward. I also slept in the hallway. The sanitary conditions were terrible. After two days, I was transferred to Ward 5 and stayed there for another two days. In Mahabad Central Prison there was no segregation of prisoners by crimes. In total I was in the Mahabad Central Prison for four days.
42. On my third night in Mahabad Central Prison, the MOI agents, namely Hajj Mehdi Zaffarani, Hamedi and one other person who had come from Tehran returned and I was taken to them for interrogation. [I believe that] it is highly likely that I later saw the person who had come from Tehran on satellite TV channels outside Iran being interviewed as a Kurdish Iranian intellectual. He has also written the memoir of a well-known person. Since I am not quite certain that my interrogator is the same person that I have seen on satellite TV, if you don't mind I will not mention his name. He was of average stature, about 5.5 feet tall, and not particularly robust. He was around 35 years old.
43. He came with the MOI agents and the first thing he said was that Kurds are all Iranian and said that no matter where they are in Iran, they are still Iranian. Then he made several proposals to me and said that I now needed to repair the damage caused by the articles I had written criticizing and attacking the regime. This meant that up until that point my pen and my thoughts were inclined to criticize the regime, and now they had to work for the regime. In other words, from then on I had to write articles in favor of the regime. He told me that if I complied I would not be fired, and would be allowed to continue working as a teacher and would be allowed to finish my Master's degree and continue with my PhD with no obstacles, and after graduation I would be transferred to the university as a faculty member.
44. In fact they wanted me to attend conferences in Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, India, Malaysia as an academic and present papers at such gatherings; but said that they would be writing the papers for me. They would write the papers but I would put my name on them and they would cover the cost for me to attend conferences and present the papers. My reply was that since I am a married man, I would have to consult with my family and cannot decide on this matter right now.

Release and Escape from Iran

45. I was later released on a \$30000 bail. A couple days after my release the harassment from the MOI office resumed and they started trying to take any excuse to call me. They would stop me by car on the streets to shake my hand and greet me so that people would see our that I was in touch with them, and thus my reputation would be ruined. They forced me to give them my response and start cooperating with them.
46. I had no choice but to decide to leave Iran after this. On July 20, 2012 I illegally smuggled myself out of Iran. It took about 10-15 days for me to exit Iran and reach Ankara. This passage had its own difficulties. On August 18, 2012 I went to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Ankara, Turkey.
47. Since I had given interviews to a few satellite television channels after my exit from Iran, the MOI office of Mahabad had twice—and each time for hours—detained my wife and interrogated her. [Agents of t]he MOI office pressured my wife to try to make me return to Iran.

48. In October 2012, they sent a subpoena to my house stating that I was to appear at the Revolutionary Court of Mahabad on October 15, 2012. In the end, in late November of 2012 a trial against me was held *in absentia*, and I was sentenced to five years' imprisonment on charges of membership in Kurdish political parties, acting against national security, assembly and collusion. In fact the Mahabad MOI office summoned my mother and informed her of the court ruling in my case.
49. In early November of 2012, while I was outside of Iran, the *herasat* office of the Education Department of West Azerbaijan Education Department also illegally issued my expulsion order.
50. At the moment, I continue to engage in journalism; I write articles and offer political analysis of the situation in Iran and the Middle East in web sites such as Akhbar-rooz, Rooonline, Kurdpa, and a few other sites, while studying the German language.