

Prisoners of faith

release
PRISONERS

EMAIL ALERT

September 2014

Abdolreza Haghnejad Iran

Iranian Christians Mohammad Roghangir, Suroush Saraie and Abdolreza Haghnejad (also known as Matthias) were arrested by the security forces at the Haghnejad home in Bandar-Azali, northern Iran, on July 5, 2014. All three men are members of the Church of Iran network. There are currently a number of Christians associated with this group who are imprisoned, perhaps the most well-known being Pastor Behnam Irani.

The Iranian authorities continue to target groups like the Church of Iran, as well as evangelical house church leaders and members. In the past three years there has been a marked increase in the number of arrests and detentions of Christians in Iran predominantly (but not exclusively) focused on evangelical churches that speak about their faith among Muslims and which have members who are Christians from a Muslim background.

Reports from the incident state that the arresting officials were not in uniform and identified themselves as intelligence officers. They raided Haghnejad's family home around 8.30am, arresting him and his two guests. The officers then thoroughly searched the house and apparently confiscated some of his personal belongings, including a computer, Bible and other Christian materials. It is unclear exactly why the Iranian authorities raided his home or where they took the three men after they arrested them. It is believed that they may have been taken to Shiraz prison in southern Iran.

All three men have been arrested previously. In May 2011, Abdolreza and a number of other Christians were acquitted of charges that included spreading propaganda against the state. He was tried again on April 8, 2012, and



Abdolreza Haghnejad, also known as Matthias.

the judge ruled, on the basis of the previous acquittal, that there was no case against him. On August 22, 2013, there was a new Tribunal hearing in Rasht at which he faced charges of 'actions against national security'.

Mohammad Roghangir and Suroush Saraie were part of a group of seven Christians who were initially arrested in October 2012 when security forces raided a prayer meeting. The group was sentenced the following July after also being found guilty of 'actions against national security'.

Mohammad was sentenced to six years' imprisonment, while Suroush received two and a half years. They remained at liberty, pending an appeal, which was subsequently rejected. It is thought that their recent arrests relate to these previous sentences.

On August 3, 2014, Haghnejad was charged with *Moharebeh*, or 'waging war against God', a charge that is a capital offence in Iran (although the 2013 Islamic Penal Code prohibits the death penalty for charges not involving a weapon).

The new charge against Haghnejad may represent a significant tactical shift in the prosecution of Iran's Christians.

HELPING CHRISTIANS IMPRISONED FOR THEIR FAITH

'I am in chains for Christ' Philippians 1:13

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PLEASE PRAY

- ▶ That the authorities will release all three men.
- ▶ That God will preserve, strengthen and deepen their faith at this time.
- ▶ For the witness of Iranian Christians to be effective as they reach out to friends and neighbours.

PLEASE WRITE

At present some of the details relating to the arrest, detention and charges against Abdolreza Haghnejad, Mohammad Roghangir and Suroush Saraie are unclear. Release partners in Iran believe that until these details are clarified it would be helpful to support these men by remembering them in prayer.

Pray also for their families, for church leaders and Christians across Iran and for the many other Iranian believers who are in prison because of their faith at this time.



Since Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's warning in 2010 of the ever-expanding influence and number of house churches, the treatment of Christians has rapidly worsened. Hassan Rouhani became President of Iran in June 2013 and promised to release political prisoners and uphold the rights of religious minorities. Although there were some early signs of encouragement, the harassment and imprisonment of Christians, mainly converts from Islam, continues.

Hundreds of Christians, mainly converts from Islam, have been arrested and detained throughout the country in the past few years. Many have been subjected to intense interrogation, including verbal and physical abuse. Some have been prosecuted on pretexts such as 'threatening national security', while others have had to pay exorbitant levels of bail. Christians are treated as second-class citizens and are subject to discrimination in many areas, such as education and employment.

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