

8 May 2023



Jubilee Campaign Statement Regarding the Recent Executions in Iran

Jubilee Campaign condemns in the strongest terms the Iranian government's unlawful and disturbing execution of two men, Yousef Mehrdad and Seyyed Sadrollah Fazeli-Zare, on Monday, 8 May 2023. Originally detained in their own homes in May 2020, Mehrdad and Fazeli-Zare were charged with establishing and participating in a Telegram channel called "Critique of Superstition and Religion" in which they allegedly shared opinions about religion which were considered blasphemous and derogatory towards the Prophet. Additionally, an unnamed member of the Telegram group was accused of arson for purportedly deliberately setting fire to faith-related texts.¹

During the first two months of their pre-trial detention, Mehrdad and Fazeli-Zare were interned in solitary confinement units in Arak Prison in Markazi province, where they were routinely denied family visits and access to legal representation for an additional six months. In April 2021, Branch 1 of the Arak Criminal Court convicted Mehrdad and Fazeli-Zare of blasphemy and sentenced them to death in accordance with articles 513 and 262 of the Islamic Penal Code of Iran. Months later in May/June 2021, the Arak Revolutionary Court sentenced each man to eight years' imprisonment on additional separate charges of "propaganda against the state", "founding or leading an organization that aims to disrupt national security", and "insulting the Supreme Leader" Ruhollah Khomeini, outlined in Penal Code Articles 500, 498, and 514, respectively.

The Iranian Supreme Court reprehensibly rejected Mehrdad's and Fazeli-Zare's appeals and upheld their unjust sentences in July/August of 2021, citing that the two individuals had allegedly confessed to their crimes. The validity of this claim is dubious, as the Iranian government has a nefarious record of exercising physical torture against detainees in order to extract coerced confessions, with the most recent revelation being the discovery of a network of no fewer than 40 facilities where prisoners are brutalized into making forced admissions of guilt.² In May 2023, the Mizan media agency of the Iranian judicial system reported that Mehrdad and Fazeli-Zare had been remanded to solitary confinement prior to their impending execution for operating the Telegram channel in question which appeared "dedicated to atheism and desecration of the sanctities".³ The Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) in Iran reported more comprehensively that the two defendants' convictions also included apostasy and "accusing the Prophet of Islam's mother of adultery".

The news of Mehrdad's and Fazeli-Zare's return to isolated detention a day prior to the scheduled implementation of the death penalty to be carried out on Friday, 5 May 2023 came as a surprise to the international community. Though

¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), [Yusef Mehrdad](#), updated 8 May 2023. ; USCIRF, [Seyyed Sadrollah Fazeli Zare](#), updated 8 May 2023.

² Iran International, "[Iran Uses Secret Prisons To Get Forced Confession From Protesters: CNN](#)", 22 February 2023. ; Allyson Horn, "[Iranian protesters recount daily beatings, forced confessions and torture tactics while in detention](#)", *ABC News Australia*, 15 March 2023.

³ David Gritten, "[Iran executes two men convicted of blasphemy](#)", *BBC*, 8 May 2023.

there has been no shortage of blasphemy charges and convictions in Iran, capital punishment has been precedently sanctioned only for particularly egregious crimes such as murder.⁴ The international human rights and religious freedom advocacy community responded to this horrific news by using their social media platforms to garner widespread attention and censure in efforts to pressure the Iranian government to abandon their execution plans. Iranian authorities responded by removing Mehrdad and Fazali-Zare from administrative segregation and returning them to the general prison population. Despite this move which sparked hope for an end to the existential threat over Mehrdad's and Fazali-Zare's lives, we are outraged and anguished by the iniquitous execution of the two men on 8 May 2023 for exercising their rights to free speech, expression, and belief to which they are accorded in the presiding 1989 Constitution.⁵

Book Five, Chapter Two of the 1991 Islamic Penal Code of Iran addresses a multitude of religious offenses. Article 513, for example, prescribes the death penalty or a term of imprisonment between one to five years' imprisonment for "insulting the sacred values of Islam or any of the Great Prophets or [twelve] Imams or the Holy Fatima". Article 514 stipulates that any individual who insults the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ruhollah Khomeini, shall face imprisonment for between six months and two years. In early 2021, the Iranian Parliament under President Hassan Rouhani passed two additional provisions to the Penal Code. The first, Article 499 bis 1, states that "anyone who insults Iranian ethnicities or divine religions or Islamic schools of thought recognized under the Constitution with the intent to cause violence or tensions in the society" will be sentenced to between two and five years in prison if such insult directly foments violence, or between six months and two years' imprisonment if no resultant violence occurs. The second provision added to the Penal Code, Article 500, prescribes two to five years' imprisonment upon any individual who engages in proselytism or evangelism".⁶

The deplorable execution of Yousef Mehrdad and Seyyed Sadrollah Fazeli-Zare pose terrifying implications for the numerous other Iranian prisoners of conscience who have similarly been detained for expressions and/or manifestations of their beliefs. While there are no other known cases of the death sentence being handed down to citizens for alleged blasphemy or apostasy, there does persist a concerning trend by which Christian leaders and church members are routinely arrested and temporarily detained for their faith-based activities which the Iranian government mischaracterizes as treasonous. On 31 December 2021 and 1 January 2022, a group of nine Christians was finally acquitted and released after spending approximately three years in prison for "promoting Zionist Christianity" and "acting against national security".⁷ In late 2020, a Christian couple - Sara Ahmadi and Homayoun Zhavah - was sentenced to eleven years' imprisonment for establishing a house church and two years for membership in such a congregation, respectively. In April 2023, the couple was informed that their third appeal for a retrial of their case had finally been approved after their prior two requests were rejected in mid- and late-2021; Sara and Homayoun were finally acquitted and released on 9 May 2023.⁸

In June 2022, the UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Nada Al-Nashif, presented the UN Secretary-General's report on human rights in Iran, stating more generally that "the death penalty continues to be imposed on the basis of charges not amounting to 'most serious crimes' and in ways incompatible with fair trial standards."⁹ Two months later in August, a group of United Nations experts¹⁰ released a public statement

⁴ Jon Gambrell, "[Iran hangs 2 in rare blasphemy case as executions surge](#)", *ABC News*, 8 May 2023.

⁵ *Iran (Islamic Republic of)'s Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989*.

⁶ Article 19, "[Iran: Parliament passes law to further choke freedoms and target minorities](#)", 19 February 2021.

⁷ Church in Chains, "[IRAN: Nine Christian converts acquitted](#)", updated 8 March 2023.

⁸ Church in Chains, "[Sara & Homayoun](#)", updated 10 May 2023.

⁹ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Presentation of the Secretary-General's report on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran](#), 21 June 2022.

¹⁰ Mr. Javaid Rehman, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran; Mr. Luciano Hazan, Chair of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Ms. Aua Baldé, Vice Chair of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Ms. Gabriella Citroni, Member of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Mr. Henrikas Mickevičius, Member of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Ms. Angkhana Neelapajit, Member of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances; Mr. Fernand de Varennes, Special Rapporteur on Minorities Issues; and Ms. Nazila Ghanea, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

condemning Iran’s discriminatory modus operandi with regards to arbitrary imprisonment of minorities. “We are seriously concerned that provisions of the Penal Code are used to prosecute individuals on grounds of religious affiliation and based on allegations that they expressed views deemed to be critical or derogatory towards Islam. [...] The international community cannot remain silent while Iranian authorities use overbroad and vague national security and espionage charges to silence religious minorities or people with dissenting opinions, remove them from their homes and effectively force them into internal displacement.”¹¹

Integrating these observations of the use of capital punishment for nonviolent conduct and the discriminatory application of the death penalty against minorities in numerous countries, in November 2022 members of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) issued a statement in which they “unequivocally call for the end of the death penalty for any activity categorised as blasphemy, apostasy, or speech that might ‘defame’ or ‘insult’ religious sentiments”.¹² This statement was largely modeled after a similar joint statement led by Australia in March 2021¹³ and an August 2019 remark by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres that capital punishment “should especially not be imposed as a sanction for forms of non-violent conduct such as apostasy [and] blasphemy [...]”.¹⁴

Jubilee Campaign decries the Iranian government’s indefensible killing of Yousef Mehrdad and Seyyed Sadrollah Fazeli-Zare which violates global standards of the right of freedom of religion or belief. The Islamic Republic of Iran has declined to accede to relevant international conventions such as the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights aiming to the abolition of the death penalty¹⁵. However, Iran is signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which recognizes the right to life, stipulates that the death penalty be reserved exclusively as a sanction for “the most serious crimes” (Article 6), and prohibits the infliction of “torture, or [...] cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”¹⁶



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¹¹ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “[Iran: UN experts alarmed by escalating religious persecution](#)”, 22 August 2022.

¹² United States Department of State, [IRFBA \[International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance\] Statement on Blasphemy and Related Offences](#), 7 November 2022.

¹³ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, [Joint statement led by Australia on the death penalty as a punishment for blasphemy and apostasy, 9 March 2021](#), 9 March 2021. ; Co-signatories: Albania; Andorra; Argentina; Austria; Belgium; Brazil; Bulgaria; Canada; Chile; Costa Rica; Croatia; Cyprus; Czech Republic; Denmark; Estonia; Fiji; Finland; France; Germany; Greece; Hungary; Iceland; Ireland; Israel; Italy; Japan; Latvia; Liechtenstein; Lithuania; Luxembourg; Malta; Mexico; Monaco; Montenegro; Netherlands; New Zealand; North Macedonia; Norway; Poland; Portugal; Romania; San Marino; Slovakia; Slovenia; Spain; Sweden; Switzerland; Ukraine; United Kingdom; United States

¹⁴ United Nations General Assembly Human Rights Council Forty-second session, *Capital punishment and the implementation of the safeguards guaranteeing protection of the rights of those facing the death penalty - Yearly supplement of the Secretary-General to his quinquennial report on capital punishment*, [A/HRC/42/28](#), 28 August 2019.

¹⁵ UN Treaty Body Database, [Ratification Status for Iran \(Islamic Republic of\)](#).

¹⁶ United Nations General Assembly, [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), 16 December 1966, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 999, p. 171.