

# Pentecostal Pastor and Wife Flee Iran After 15-Year Prison Sentence

A Christian pastor and his wife are running for their lives after being arrested and sentenced to prison for celebrating Christmas, among other traditions.

Iranian-Assyrian Christian pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz, 66, was sentenced to 10 years in prison, and his wife Shamiram Issavi, 65, was sentenced to five years. Bet-Tamraz and other Christians were arrested on Dec. 26, 2014. What was the heinous crime that earned them a stay in Iran's infamous Evin Prison—the Iranian penitentiary labeled “a torture factory”? Holding a gathering to celebrate the Christmas holiday.

The arresting officers reportedly told them they were being arrested for participating in an “unlawful and unauthorized gathering”:

*Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz, former leader of the Assyrian Pentecostal Church of Tehran (Shahrara), was arrested on Friday, 26 December, along with two of his friends, Amin Afshar-Naderi and Kavian Fallah-Mohammadi, as they celebrated Christmas together.*

*Ten plainclothes officers, introducing themselves as agents of the Revolutionary Court, entered the pastor's home and confiscated many personal items, including Bibles, mobile phones and identification documents.*

After years of failed appeals hearings, which were repeatedly delayed or canceled, Pastor Bet-Tamraz and his wife Shamiram were notified that their appeal was unceremoniously denied. Shortly after, Shamiram received a notice to report to Evin

Prison to begin her 5-year sentence.

Iran's brutal Evin Prison has been described as a "house of horrors" where "beatings, torture, mock executions and brutal interrogations are the norm." What chance did two innocent Christians in their late 60s have of surviving such a hellish environment?

Pastor Victor and his wife chose the only option for survival they saw possible. They have reportedly fled Iran for their lives. Now they seek shelter and safety while they vow to continue appealing their unjust sentencing.

The ACLJ is very familiar with Iran's disgusting persecution of its Christian citizens. We've told you how we've gone directly to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to demand protection for Iranian Christians who live in fear of targeted harassment, arrest and imprisonment because of their faith.

We continue to advocate for the release of Iranian Christian pastor Youcef Nadarkhani who has languished for over two years now in that very same Evin Prison, enduring unknown manners of abuse, after being beaten and arrested by Iranian authorities because of his faith. We delivered a critical written submission through our international affiliate, the European Center for Law and Justice (ECLJ), urging intervention to free Pastor Youcef and reunite him with his wife and young children.

And just recently, we delivered a critical oral intervention at the UNHRC in Geneva, Switzerland, through the ECLJ, asking for protection for Iranian Christians.

The greatest threat to religious freedom in Iran is the extreme persecution that religious minorities face at the hands of the Iranian government. This year, a human rights watch group ranked Iran as the ninth worst place to live for Christians, because, as we highlighted in our UPR report on

Iran, churches in Iran are routinely raided and Christians are targeted for arrest simply because they are living out their faith in community with others.

We also reminded the international body that as a U.N. member state, Iran is obligated under its charter to uphold “respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.” Its actions against its own Christians and other religious minorities are a direct violation of that charter.

As we stated at the UNHRC:

“As a member of the United Nations, Iran has a responsibility to adhere to the principles set forth in the U.N. Charter. It is imperative that Iran work to actively protect the rights of its citizens, and reform its laws so that all its citizens are free to practice their religion peacefully without fear of arrest and violence from their government.

“By harassing Christians, rounding up Christian pastors, and locking them up in horrific prisons to suffer, Iran is disgracing its international commitments. It has to stop now.”

We will continue to monitor the plight of Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz and his wife Shamiram Issavi if and when updates become available and will be prepared to take action on their behalf if necessary. And we continue to aggressively advocate for the freedom of Pastor Youcef until he is allowed to return home to his family. {eoa}

*For the original article, visit .*