

‘Terror Factory’ Sets Sight on Christians Around the World

The daughter of a former pastor in Iran—Dabrina Bet-Tamraz—recently described the persecution and suffering to which her family is being subjected after being sentenced to lengthy prison terms for “crimes” related to Christianity, according to an article by Uzay Bulut, Gatestone Institute, writing for Assyrian International News Agency (AINA).

Speaking from the safety of refuge in Switzerland, where she managed to flee with the help of friends, Dabrina Bet-Tamraz, the daughter of Victor and Shamiram Bet-Tamraz, told Gatestone Institute: “I was arrested many times in Iran. I was threatened, forced to cooperate with the government against pastors, Christian leaders and church members. I was kept in custody with no legal permit, with no female officer present and in male surroundings.

“I now feel safe in Switzerland, but when Iranian MOIS [intelligence agency—also known as VAJA and previously as VEVAK] officers published an article on social media with my pictures and home address—encouraging Iranian men living in Switzerland to ‘pay me a visit’—I had to move to another house.”

AINA says it has been nearly a year since Dabrina appealed to the U.N.’s Human Rights Council in Geneva to intervene to overturn the “false and baseless charges” imposed on her father, mother, brother and other Christians and Christian converts in Iran.

The timeline of her family’s arrests is as follows: In 2014, Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz was arrested, along with two converts to Christianity from Islam, during a private Christmas

gathering in his home in Tehran.

In 2016, Ramiel Bet-Tamraz, the pastor's son (Dabrina's brother), was arrested, along with four of his friends, all Muslim converts to Christianity, during a picnic in Tehran. They were held and interrogated at Evin Prison, known for its abuse and torture of dissidents.

In 2017, Pastor Victor Bet-Tamraz and two converts were convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison for "conducting evangelism" and carrying out "illegal church activities."

According to the article, the pastor's wife, Shamiram (Dabrina's mother), was summoned to the office of the prosecutor in Evin Prison and subsequently sentenced to 10 years in jail for "membership of a group with the purpose of disrupting national security" and for "gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security."

Her family members have all appealed their convictions. While the appeals are pending, the family members are currently out on bail and awaiting further hearings.

In the AINA report, Dabrina said that her family has been living in limbo—something that is taking a psychological and financial toll on their lives and livelihood: "They are trying to survive, not knowing what is going to happen next, not being able to make plans about their future. Their lives are just on hold.

"They are living with constant anxiety, powerless, not having security and safety even in their own home. They are fully aware of the dangers around them but are not able to do anything to protect themselves. They are watched, controlled and wiretapped; it is their everyday life. Every time they get a phone call, they are filled with fear: It might be Iranian intelligence officers calling them for an interrogation session or a court hearing.

“All my father’s money has been frozen. He has no income now and is not allowed to have a government job. He is 65 years old and is living on a pension that is not even enough to pay for food. Also, my brother was constantly accused by his interrogators of carrying on my father’s ministry—of teaching and preaching the Bible, since my father is no longer able to do so.”

AINA said the ministry, the Assyrian Pentecostal Church in Tehran, was shut down by the Iranian Interior Ministry in 2009, for offering services in the Persian language—something ethnic churches in Iran are not permitted to do. The church was only allowed to reopen after Bet-Tamraz was ousted and replaced with a different religious leader who conducted services in Assyrian.

Amnesty International launched a campaign to demand that the Iranian government “quash the convictions and sentences” of Bet-Tamraz, his wife and the two other Christian defendants, and to “respect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”

The Assyrian Policy Institute sent a public letter to the head of the Iranian Judiciary and Tehran’s prosecutor general, requesting that they dismiss the charges against these Christians and “stop the harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention and imprisonment of Christians, including converts, in Iran.”

Last year, a group of United Nations “special rapporteurs” on human rights issued a joint statement calling on Iran to “ensure a fair and transparent final hearing” for Bet-Tamraz and the two Christian converts. The statement read, in part: “We are aware of several other reported cases in which members of the Christian minority have received heavy sentences after being charged with ‘threatening national security,’ either for converting people or for attending house churches.

"This shows a disturbing pattern of individuals being targeted because of their religion or beliefs, in this case a religious minority in the country. Members of the Christian minority in Iran, particularly those who have converted to the faith, are facing severe discrimination and religious persecution."

The story of the Bet-Tamraz family is part of what the human rights organization, International Christian Concern, has reported to be "Iran's Terror Factory" targeting Christians: "In Iran, any practice that contradicts Islam is regarded as a national security threat, punished severely by the court system."

"Revolutionary courts were created to guard against all threats to Islam. These courts have evolved into a well-oiled machine of oppression that operates with impunity under state protection. The courts are closely intertwined with the Intelligence Ministry. Judges have at their disposal revolutionary guards (secret police) and a network of prisons used to torture and interrogate Christians."

According to International Christian Concern, Dr. Mike Ansari from Heart4Iran, an Iranian Christian minister, said about victims of this court system: "If you recant and repent, you'll go to jail. And if you don't, you'll be killed."

The International Christian Concern report added: "The penal code lacks guidance for the judiciary regarding Muslim converts. Christians may be looking at large fines, detention, lengthy prison sentences or even execution under Islamic Sharia law. The sentences of Christian converts are left up to the interpretation of the judge and may be founded on anything—the judge's mood that day, what he had for breakfast, his interpretation of Sharia law or his level of hatred toward Christianity."

The above situation, Dabrina continued, is responsible for her family's plight.

“The judge has not even found enough evidence to sentence my mother. The case was not clear to him. He requested more information and documents from the interrogators. He will most likely take all the cases—of my father, mother and brother—together and call them all in for the next court hearing.”

The trouble is, she said, no date for the next hearing has even been set.

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