

# Lives of Service <sup>1</sup>

## Profiles of Seven Imprisoned Baha'is, Members of the Yaran

by Jaine Toth

**Welcome, and thank you for spending this evening with us.**

We'll begin with the musical invocation, *Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá*, sung by the World Congress Choir. Next, we'll have a prayer read and then a recording of the prayer *God is Sufficient* sung by Ladjamaya.

NEW SLIDE - AUTOMATICALLY PLAYS MUSIC - *Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá*

NEW SLIDE - WHILE PRAYER IS READ

NEW SLIDE - AUTOMATICALLY PLAYS MUSIC - *God is Sufficient*

NEW SLIDE - STAYS UP WHILE LADJAMAYA AND JAINE SPEAK

**Seven Bahá'í leaders are in year seven of a 20-year prison sentence in Iran. After some background on the overall situation, we will offer you a glimpse into their personal lives — lives that belie the charges against them.**

Their current imprisonment is particularly disquieting because of their leadership positions as members of a national-level coordinating group known as the Yaran-i-Iran (Friends in Iran). We'll refer to them hereafter as the Yaran.

**All Bahá'í elected and appointed institutions were banned by the government following the Islamic revolution. In the absence of a national governing council (National Spiritual Assembly), the Yaran was then formed with the full knowledge of the government and served as an ad hoc coordinating body for the 300,000 Bahá'ís in that country.**

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<sup>1</sup> See online with related material at [https://bahai-library.com/toth\\_lives\\_service](https://bahai-library.com/toth_lives_service)

The various governments in power in Iran since then **have always been aware** of the Yaran; in fact, over the years the government routinely had dealings with its members, albeit often informally. So their arrests were unexpected but not surprising. They occurred in raids reminiscent of sweeps following the 1979 Islamic revolution. Most took place in the early 1980s and led to the execution of **dozens of Bahá'í leaders.**

**These seven individuals were held in prison for close to a year without being charged with any crimes or had evidence introduced for any offenses. At no time during their incarceration were the accused given access to their legal counsel, Mrs. Shirin Ebadi.**

**Mrs. Ebadi herself was threatened, intimidated, and vilified in the news media after taking on their case. She was refused access to their files. In December 2008, the government moved to shut down the offices of the Defenders of Human Rights Centre, which was founded by Mrs. Ebadi.**

Some 20 months after being imprisoned, a trial finally began on 12 January 2010. Throughout their long wait for justice, the seven received hardly one hour's access to their legal counsel and suffered appalling treatment and deprivations, including psychological and physical hardships.

**At their initial appearance they each categorically denied all charges, the main ones being:**

- **Espionage for Israel**
- **Propaganda against the Islamic Republic**
- **Corruption on earth**

Their second appearance took place on February 7, 2010, but the proceedings were mainly procedural.

**The third session on April 12, 2010 was supposed to be a closed hearing. On arrival, the seven, with the agreement of their attorney, refused to participate due to the presence of non-judicial personnel and the trial was adjourned.**

The trial ended on June 14, 2010 with each of the seven accused being convicted, The each received a 20-year sentence. An appeals court later reduced the terms to ten years, but that decision was later reversed with the 20-year sentences being reinstated.

**To remove this from the realm of statistics or “just another news story,” we’d like to introduce these seven people to you and share a brief biographical sketch about each of them. You will hear references to the BIHE (Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education).**

The BIHE was established by Bahá’ís in the late 1980s as an alternative institution of higher education after Bahá’í youth were banned from public and private universities in Iran in the early 1980s.

Accordingly, many of the Yaran and/or their family members received education from the BIHE or its adjunct, the Advanced Bahá’í Studies Institute, which we'll refer to as the ABSI, or they have contributed to its work as lecturers or instructors.

**In recounting the voluntary service these individuals rendered to the Bahá’í community, there are also references to various Bahá’í institutions, such as**

- **national or local governing councils, known as Spiritual Assemblies**
- **various committees**
- **the Auxiliary Board, which comprises a group of individuals appointed to inspire, encourage, and promote learning.**

**Most of these institutions have since been banned or dissolved in Iran because of government persecution.**

This program was initially presented in 2009 with data gleaned from reports written at that time. We've updated the ages of the seven Yaran, and their family members, and as many other details as we could find. Where their families live, study or work may have changed. We were unable to update that information, but it suffices to offer an understanding of their personal lives.

**We are now honored to introduce you to these seven innocent and wronged people.**

## **NEW SLIDE**

### **Mrs. Fariba Kamalabdi**

#### **Arrested May 14, 2008 at her home in Tehran**

Born in Tehran on September 12, 1962, Mrs. Kamalabadi is now 52. She was an excellent student, graduating from high school with honors. Nevertheless, she was barred from attending university. In her mid-30s, she embarked on an eight-year period of informal study and ultimately received an advanced degree in developmental psychology from the BIHE.

Because of her volunteer work for the Bahá'í community, she was twice arrested and held for periods of one and two months, respectively, before her last arrest and imprisonment in May 2008.

Mrs. Kamalabadi married Ruhollah Taefi, in 1982. They have three children. At the time of her arrest, son, Varqa, about 24, had received a doctoral degree in political science and international relations in the United Kingdom and was continuing his research in China; he currently resides in Melbourne, Australia. 20-something Alhan studied psychology at ABSI, and Taraneh, was a 14-year-old junior high school student in Tehran when her mother was taken away from her.

Mrs. Kamalabadi's experience with persecution extends beyond her immediate situation. Her father was fired from his job as a physician with the government health service in the 1980s because he was a Bahá'í. He later suffered imprisonment and torture.

During the seven-day campaign in May 2015 aimed at drawing attention to the plight of the Yaran, her son, Dr. Varqa Taefi, lamented "We have missed seven years of each other's lives. She could not attend my wedding or my graduation, precious moments that other families take for granted. She wasn't there when my sister finished high school, or for the marriage of my younger sister and the birth

of her first grandchild." He added, "Her life and dedication to serving humankind is living proof of the equality of women and men. My mother would enjoy the highest respect and social status in most countries and her service to society would be welcomed.

"She is extremely humble — she accomplished so much every day yet never expressed pride about her achievements."

## **NEW SLIDE**

### **Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani**

**Arrested May 14, 2008 at his home in Tehran**

**Born July 27, 1933 in the city of Sangsar, Mr. Khanjani grew up on a dairy farm in Semnan province and never obtained more than a high school education. Yet his dynamic personality soon led to a successful career in industrial production – and as a Bahá'í leader. He is now 81 years old.**

**In his professional career, Mr. Khanjani worked as a purchasing supervisor for the Pepsi Cola Company in Iran. Next, he started a charcoal production business, and later he established a brick-making factory, the first such automated factory in Iran, which employed several hundred people.**

**In the early 1980s, due to religious persecution, he was forced to shut down that factory and abandon it, putting most of his employees out of work.**

**He spent much of the 1980s on the run under the threat of death from Iranian authorities.**

**In voluntary service to his religious community, Mr. Khanjani was at various points a member of the local spiritual assembly of Isfáhán, a regional level Auxiliary Board member, and in the early 1980s a member of the so-called “third” National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran – a group that in 1984 saw four of its nine members executed by the government.**

After that, he was able to establish a mechanized farm on properties owned by his family. Nevertheless, authorities placed many restrictions on him, making it difficult to do business. These restrictions extended to his children and relatives, and included.

- Refusal of loans
- limiting their business dealings
- closing their places of business
- banning travel outside the country

Mr. Khanjani married Ms. Ashraf Sobhani in the mid-1950s. They have four children. The following has their approximate ages today, in 2015. Their occupations and locations are from 2009: Farida, 57, a chiropractor working in China; Maria, about 55, an artist who is married with two children and resides in Tehran; Alaeddin, 60, an optometrist residing in Tehran, is married with two children; and Emilia, 51, who is married with two children and also lives in Tehran.

Mr. Khanjani was arrested and jailed at least three times before his current incarceration, including a two-month period in the late 1980s. While detained then, he was intensely questioned, and during those interrogations he was able to make considerable headway in convincing authorities of the non-threatening nature of the Bahá'í Faith and he, along with many others, was subsequently released.

His son, nephew, granddaughter, grandson, and grandnephew have all spent time in prison; the last two are still incarcerated. Many of the family shops and properties also, have been sealed, shut down or subjected to various attacks.

In August 2014, for example, Mr. Khanjani's son, Aladdin, was arrested along with four other Bahá'ís in a raid on an optical shop in Semnan where he worked. It was the second time, at least, that Aladdin, known as Niki, was arrested. In 2011, the apartment of Mr. Khanjani's brother, Nejat, was attacked by twice in one month by unknown individuals who threw firebombs at the windows.

**His wife, Ashraf Sobhani, passed away on 10 March 2010, while Mr. Khanjani was still in prison.**

**Mr. Khanjani's family home, located in the family's agricultural fields in Semnan Province's Dazgareh Afshar village. was demolished. The family received a 48-hour demolition notice from the Intelligence Ministry and the Semnan Province Council on April 19, 2015. They had 48 hours to evacuate the property. They went to Tehran with their lawyer and secured orders from the Supreme Court to stop the demolition operations, but when they arrived back in Semnan, they observed that 270 square meters of the house had already been demolished and it was too late to do anything."**

**A nephew recently said "He is 82 and he must remain in prison for another 13 years. During the past seven years, he was not granted even one day of furlough. He was transferred to a hospital a while back, due to heart problems. He had surgery, but they did not even agree to his post-op furlough."**

## **NEW SLIDE**

**Mr. Afif Naeimi**

**Arrested May 14, 2008 at his home in Tehran**

Mr. Naeimi, an industrialist, was unable to pursue his dream of becoming a doctor because as a Bahá'í he was denied access to a university education. Instead, he diverted his attention to business, one of the few avenues of work open to Bahá'ís, taking over his father-in-law's blanket and textile factory.

Born September 6, 1961 in Yazd, he was just three years old when his father died. He was raised in part by his uncles. While still in elementary school, he was sent to live with relatives in Jordan and, although he started with no knowledge of Arabic, he soon rose to the top of his class.

An active volunteer, Mr. Naeimi taught Bahá'í children's classes, conducted classes for adults, taught at the BIHE, and was a member of the Auxiliary Board.

He married Ms. Shohreh Khallo<sup>kh</sup>i in the early 1980s. They have two sons: Fareed, around 43, who is married and a graduate of the ABSI, and Sina, about 28, who has studied music.

In November 2014, he was taken to a hospital in Tehran for treatment. Despite severe stomach bleeding and considerable weight loss, he was returned to prison by order of the Attorney General. According to Sahaam news, this prisoner had been fighting serious health problems for about a year and had been hospitalized many times.

Both the prison doctor and the Medical Council that was convened at the request of the Attorney General expressed their professional opinion in many official letters that this prisoner was not able to physically tolerate prison conditions. According to the physicians' diagnosis, Afif Naeimi should either be hospitalized or sent home to rest due to his severe health condition and heart failure. He is not physically fit to withstand prison conditions. Nevertheless, he remains incarcerated.

## **NEW SLIDE**

### **Mr. Saeid Rezaie**

**Arrested May 14, 2008 at his home in Tehran**

**Mr. Rezaie, 57, was born in Abadan on September 27, 1957. He was raised in Shíráz, where he completed high school with distinction. He earned a degree in agricultural engineering from Pahlavi University in Shíráz, attending with the help of a scholarship funded from outside the country.**

**In 1981, he married Ms. Shaheen Rowhanian. They have three children: in 2009 daughter Martha, now 30, was studying library science, and Ma'man, 27 now, was a student of architecture. At the original writing of this biography, their son, Payvand, then 12, was in his second year of middle school.**

Mr. Rezaie actively served the Bahá'í community from the time he was a young man. He taught children's classes for many years, and served on the Bahá'í Education and Bahá'í Life Institutes. He was also a member of the National Education Institute.

A scholar and an author of several books, he served as an academic adviser to Bahá'í students.

During the early 1980s, when persecution of Bahá'ís was particularly intense and widespread, Mr. Rezaie moved to northern Iran and worked as a farming manager for a time. Later he moved to Kerman and worked as a carpenter and at other odd jobs, in part because of the difficulties Bahá'ís faced in finding formal employment or operating businesses.

In 1985, he opened an agricultural equipment company with a Bahá'í friend in Fars Province. That company prospered and won wide respect among farmers in the region.

He experienced various forms of persecution for his Bahá'í beliefs, including an arrest and detention in 2006 that led to 40 days in solitary confinement.

Mr. Rezaie's two daughters were among 54 Bahá'í youth arrested in Shíráz in May 2006 while engaged in a humanitarian project aimed at helping underprivileged young people. They were later released but three of their colleagues were sentenced to four years in prison on false charges and remain incarcerated.

At an unknown date, he underwent emergency heart surgery. One of his sister's said, "Following surgery, doctors recommended that Saeid rest for a month and receive therapy, but the authorities put him back into a prison cell just a week after his surgery. In the political prisoner section of the prison, where Saeid is kept, inmates are not allowed any interaction with other sections of the prison. As a result, they are not given adequate time for fresh air, as they must be separated from other sections at all times."

**On 7 March 2012, Mr. Rezaie had to be transferred to hospital to have a CT scan done. He suffered from an inflammation of the lymph glands which had been worsened by a lack of medical care during his imprisonment. Unfortunately, we found no information to say whether or not he received treatment nor could we locate any current report on his condition.**

## **NEW SLIDE**

### **Mrs. Mahvash Sabet**

#### **Arrested in Mashhad on March 5, 2008**

Born Mahvash Shahriyari on February 4, 1953 in Ardestan, Mrs. Sabet moved to Tehran when she was in the fifth grade. In university, she studied psychology, obtaining a bachelor's degree. Mrs. Sabet began her professional career as a teacher and also worked as a principal at several schools. In her professional role, she also collaborated with the National Literacy Committee of Iran. After the Islamic revolution, however, like thousands of other Iranian Bahá'í educators, she was fired from her job and blocked from working in public education.

For 15 years, she served as director of the BIHE where she taught psychology and management.

She married Siyvash Sabet on May 21, 1973. They have a son, Foroud, 39, and a daughter, Negar, 30.

While all of the other members of the Yaran were taken into custody at their homes in Tehran on May 14, 2008, Mrs. Sabet's arrest came two months earlier, on March 5<sup>th</sup>, in Mashhad. Although she resides in Tehran, she had been summoned to Mashhad by the Ministry of Intelligence, ostensibly on the grounds that she was required to answer questions related to the burial of an individual in the Bahá'í cemetery in that city. Instead, she was arrested. She is now 62 years of age.

In an interview with the BBC, a relative said she suffers from osteoporosis and was hospitalized in 2014 for a while following a fall in the prison courtyard.

Mrs. Sabet began writing poetry in prison, and a collection of her work, aptly named *Prison Poems* was published in English translation on April 1, 2013. Some express despondency, woe — others hope, determination, faith. There are supplications and tributes. All stir the emotions. I'll share with you this one sample:

No hand reaches to protect this hundred-petalled rose,  
no door opens at our knock; the bell's out of reach.  
We're fallen and abased on love's long road  
without wine at the banquet nor a cup to quench.  
No ray from the Unseen is here to lift our gloom;  
nights are pitch, air stagnant, and moon pale.  
Not a single messenger brings comfort to this room;  
not a star nor any orb lights up this dismal cell.  
No sign of justice here, no hope of it anymore;  
impossible to touch the judge's robe or beg mercy at his feet.  
Bleak vision, fearful future, a world busy at its wars.  
so what prospect is there to escape this weary fate?  
To the desert walker, all seas are fading mirages.  
To one dead of thirst, the spring of certitude has dried.  
We shout as loudly as we can, but our voices too are caged,  
and day after day death is denied, as well as aid.  
No one listens. No one hears this wingless bird.

“One of the remarkable things about Mahvash is the degree to which she has put her time in prison to good use, by writing poems and also serving other prisoners by counselling them and helping them to be strong in the face of adversity,” said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Baha’i International Community to the United Nations.

## **NEW SLIDE**

### **Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli**

**Arrested May 14, 2008 at his home in Tehran**

**Born June 1, 1951 in Mashhad, Mr. Tavakkoli studied psychology in university and then completed two years of service as an army lieutenant.**

**He married Ms. Tahereh Fakhri Tuski at the age of 23. They have two sons. Naeim, about 37, who lives in Canada with his wife where he works as a civil engineer, and Nabil, 30, who was studying architecture at the BIHE at the time of his father’s arrest.**

**Mr. Tavakkoli later took additional training and then specialized in the care of the physically and mentally handicapped, working in a government position until his firing, due to his religious affiliation, in 1981 or 1982.**

**To support himself and his family after he was fired from his government position, Mr. Tavakkoli established a small millwork carpentry shop in the city of Gonbad. There he also established a series of classes in Bahá’í studies for adults and young people.**

**Mr. Tavakkoli was elected to the local Bahá’í governing council in Mashhad in the late 1960s or early 1970s while a student at the university there, and he later served on another local Bahá’í council in Sari before such institutions were banned in the early 1980s. He also served on various youth committees, and, later, during the early 1980s he was appointed to the Auxiliary Board. He was appointed to Yaran in the late 1980s.**

Prior to his current imprisonment, Mr. Tavakkoli experienced intermittent detainment and harassment and in 2006 was jailed for four months without charge, with most of that time spent in solitary confinement.

He has been periodically detained by the authorities. Among the worst of these incidents was in 2006 when he was held incommunicado for ten days by intelligence agents, along with fellow Yaran member Fariba Kamalabadi. At that time, he was held for four months and during that confinement developed serious kidney and orthotic problems.

In 2014, in a poignant letter sent from prison to his granddaughter, Mr. Tavakkoli said he was proud to be imprisoned for his beliefs. "I don't want you to ever bear any ill will toward your countrymen," he wrote. "I assure you that we even love those who have persecuted us; not only do we not feel hatred toward them, but we pray for them."

His son, Naeim, said his father was an ordinary person who was called upon to do extraordinary things.

"My father is not an unusually brave man, or gifted with exceptional talents, nor does he possess the ability to learn faster than others. But when it comes to serving the Faith, he fears nothing – absolutely nothing."

He recalled, "Once I remarked that Bahá'u'lláh had admonished us to moderation in all things. My father responded, 'But you have to define moderation for yourself in relation to the Faith's priorities.'

"When it came to service, my father knew no moderation. Every single day of the week, for 18 hours a day, he was engaged in the most intense work of the Cause. I remember him as a tall, slim, pleasant looking young man. I don't know when he became an old, ill man. May God watch over him in prison."

**NEW SLIDE**

**Mr. Vahid Tizfahm**

## **Arrested May 14, 2008 at his home in Tehran**

Mr. Tizfahm, 41, an optometrist, owned an optical shop in Tabríz, where he lived until moving to Tehran in early 2008.

Born May 16, 1973 in the city of Urumiyyih, he spent his childhood and youth there. After receiving his high school diploma in mathematics, he went to Tabríz at the age of 18 to study for his chosen profession. He later also studied sociology at the ABSI.

At the age of 23, Mr. Tizfahm married Furuzandeh Nikumanesh. When he was arrested, his then nine-year-old son, Samim, was in the fourth grade.

Since his youth, Mr. Tizfahm served the Bahá'í community in a variety of capacities. At one time he was a member of the Bahá'í National Youth Committee. Later, he was appointed to the Auxiliary Board. He also taught local Bahá'í children's classes and was appointed to the Yaran in 2006.

Earlier this year, he sent a letter from prison that sought to answer why he has held to his beliefs in the face of persecution, especially the relentless questions of his interrogators.

"Yes, I think differently, I act differently and I see differently," he wrote. My world is a world of kindness and love. My approach is service to others and my mentality desires the elimination of all forms of prejudice. My aspiration is to create unity among all my compatriots from every ethnicity, group and religion."

"My heart is free of any animosity and my hands – after many years of confinement and unending pain and suffering – continue to be willing to shake the hands of those who accompany me in the reconstruction of my home land and the revival of our beloved Irán."

## **NEW SLIDE**

**We hope this glimpse into the lives of these seven precious souls touched your hearts and made their plight more real to you — not *just something happening a world away.***

Perhaps you'll want to join with people around the world who are showing their support and making their voices heard.

NEW SLIDE

NEW SLIDE

NEW SLIDE

NEW SLIDE

We'll close with a song written and sung by K. C. Porter, simply entitled Yaran. It opens with a Persian chant. Before cutting this single, he asked several people to chant for him, but none of them gave it the emotion he sought. To his surprise, someone got Fariba Kamalabadi on the phone — from prison — for him, and K.C. recorded her chanting with his cell phone. He said it was exactly what he had imagined for the song. Now, sit back and hear her voice in prayer before listening to his song.

NEW SLIDE AUTOMATICALLY PLAYS MUSIC - *Yaran*

TURN OFF PROJECTOR