



# Forced Confessions: Targeting Iran's Cyber-Journalists



## **Iran Human Rights Documentation Center**

The Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC) believes that the development of an accountability movement and a culture of human rights in Iran are crucial to the long-term peace and security of the country and the Middle East region. As numerous examples have illustrated, the removal of an authoritarian regime does not necessarily lead to an improved human rights situation if institutions and civil society are weak, or if a culture of human rights and democratic governance has not been cultivated. By providing Iranians with comprehensive human rights reports, data about past and present human rights violations and information about international human rights standards, particularly the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the IHRDC programs will strengthen Iranians' ability to demand accountability, reform public institutions, and promote transparency and respect for human rights. Encouraging a culture of human rights within Iranian society as a whole will allow political and legal reforms to have real and lasting weight.

The **IHRDC** seeks to:

- Establish a comprehensive and objective historical record of the human rights situation in Iran since the 1979 revolution, and on the basis of this record, establish responsibility for patterns of human rights abuses;
- Make such record available in an archive that is accessible to the public for research and educational purposes;
- Promote accountability, respect for human rights and the rule of law in Iran; and
- Encourage an informed dialogue on the human rights situation in Iran among scholars and the general public in Iran and abroad.

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#### Photographs:

The front cover photo is taken by Fars News Agency from the press conference Prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi organized for the four Internet activists and bloggers. The portrait is of the former Head of the Iranian Judiciary (1999 – 2009), Ayatollah Seyyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi.

Photographs used throughout the report were obtained online.

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Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, New Haven, Connecticut

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Iran Human Rights Documentation  
Center

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## Introduction

In these statements, three Iranian cyber-journalists describe, in detail, their harrowing experiences of being illegally arrested, detained, tortured and eventually convicted by the Iranian regime during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami. Two of the journalists—Roozbeh Mirebrahimi and Omid Memarian—were active cyber-journalists residing in and around Tehran at the time of their arrests. Mirebrahimi, who was affiliated with publications such as *Etemad* and *Jomhuriyat*, was arrested on September 27, 2004. He spent the following two months in detention. Memarian was arrested on October 10, 2004, and was released a little more than a month and a half later. Both cyber-journalists spent time in illegal detention facilities operated by Iran's Parallel Intelligence Apparatus, followed by imprisonment in Tehran's infamous Evin prison. The third witness—Arash Sigarchi—was the Editor-in-Chief of *Gilan-e Emrooz* in the northern Iranian city of Rasht. He was arrested on January 8, 2005, and spent the following two months in detention.

Despite guarantees under international and Iranian law that those charged with press-related crimes are to be tried in public and before a jury, none of these journalists were ever tried in open court. They were charged with (and convicted of) moral, press, and national security crimes. Mirebrahimi and Memarian were found guilty *in absentia*, and sentenced on February 4, 2009. Mirebrahimi was sentenced to two years, two days in prison and eighty-four lashes, and Memarian was sentenced to two years, six months in prison and ten lashes. Sigarchi was initially sentenced to 14 years in prison, but his sentence was later reduced to three years on appeal.

The convictions of these cyber-journalists were primarily based on their confessions that were obtained through the use of extreme physical and psychological pressure, including regular beatings, unlawful interrogations, and solitary confinement. While detained, they were denied access to legal representation, family visits and the most basic accommodations. Mirebrahimi and Memarian were only released after agreeing to participate in an elaborate scheme concocted by Tehran's Chief Prosecutor, Saeed Mortazavi (also known as the "Butcher of the Press"). Pursuant to the scheme, Mirebrahimi was released and agreed to write a confession letter and present it to media outlets for publication. Once the letter was published, Mortazavi allowed the release of Memarian and another cyber-journalist. Mortazavi's goal was clearly to discredit the reform movement and clamp down on cyber-journalists and bloggers who were increasingly relying on the Internet as an alternate media outlet.

The experiences of these journalists were not unique. In conjunction with the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center's reports *Ctrl+Alt+Delete: Iran's Response to the Internet* (May 2009) and *Covert Terror: Iran's Parallel Intelligence Apparatus* (April 2009), these statements expose a network of Iranian government actors—including members of the security and parallel intelligence forces, the Judiciary, and state-run media outlets such as *Kayhan* newspaper and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting—responsible for silencing voices of dissent in cyberspace.

The witness statements in this publication are the results of interviews conducted by IHRDC staff in 2008 and 2009.

## Roozbeh Mirebrahimi

Roozbeh Mirebrahimi is an Iranian journalist and blogger. He acquired his bachelor's degree in political science from the Islamic Azad University of Tehran in 2004.

Mirebrahimi began his journalistic activities in his home town of Rasht. His professional career as a journalist started when the reform movement gained momentum in Iran in the late 1990s. Since then, Mirebrahimi has served as reporter, writer, political editor, social editor and editor-in-chief for many publications, including *Etemad*, *Etemad-e Melli*, *Shargh*, *Tose'eh*, *Eqtesad-e Khanevadeh*, *Seday-e Edalat*, *Hambastegi*, *Jomhuriyat*, *Iran-e Ma*, *Roozonline*, and *Iran dar Jahan*. He has worked as a freelance reporter for several newspapers, and later joined the political desk of *Mardomsalari*, a reformist newspaper. He eventually became the political editor of *Etemad*, also a reformist newspaper.

In 2004, Mirebrahimi joined *Jomhuriyat* newspaper and acted as the social editor of *Tose'eh* newspaper. By then, he was an established cyber-journalist and blogger. Mirebrahimi often published his articles on his blogs and sent them to reformist websites.

Mirebrahimi was arrested on September 27, 2004, for his allegedly illegal cyber-journalist and blogging activities. He spent the next two months in detention. His political charges included membership in illegal groups, propaganda against the regime, spreading lies, insulting the Supreme Leader and disrupting the public order. The Prosecutor of Tehran, Saed Mortazavi, released him only after he and other bloggers agreed to publish their forced confessions in various newspapers. On February 4, 2009, Mirebrahimi was sentenced (*in absentia*) to two years, two days' imprisonment and eighty-four lashes.

Two years after his release, Mirebrahimi and his wife left Iran and resettled in the United States in late 2006. They currently live in New York City.

In 2006, Human Rights Watch awarded Mirebrahimi the Hellman-Hammett International prize. During the 2007-08 academic year, Mirebrahimi was the First International Journalist in Residence at the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate School of Journalism. Mirebrahimi has also worked as a consultant to Human Rights Watch, and written several books in Persian including, *Untold Stories of the '79 Revolution* and *Untold Stories*. His forthcoming books are *Reforms Under Eight* and *Freedom and Nothing Else*.

Mirebrahimi is currently *Radio Free Europe's* correspondent in New York.



Roozbeh Mirebrahimi



### Witness Statement of Roozbeh Mirebrahimi

**Name:** Roozbeh Mirebrahimi

**Place of Birth:** Rasht, Iran

**Date of Birth:** September 21, 1978

**Occupation:** Journalist; Blogger

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**Interviewing Organization:** Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

**Date of Interview:** February 1, 2009

**Interviewer:** IHRDC Staff

**Witnesses:**

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This statement was prepared pursuant to an in-person interview with Mr. Roozbeh Mirebrahimi. The statement consists of 91 paragraphs and 20 pages. The interview was conducted on October 23, 2008. The statement was approved by Mr. Mirebrahimi on August 21, 2009.



## Witness Statement

1. My name is Roozbeh Mirebrahimi and I was born on September 21, 1978 in Rasht.<sup>1</sup> My name appeared for the first time in a cultural publication called *Mehr*. I wrote letters for this publication. Slowly, I became interested in journalism. At the time, I had bought a typewriter and started to publish my own articles at my house. I still have copies of them. Gradually, I became more interested in publishing and expanded my relationship with various publications. In the beginning, I wrote for local publications and they published my writings. After I finished my military service, I went to Tehran to study at the university. I sent my articles to different places for publication, and eventually they appeared in national newspapers.
2. At first, I did not think about the political environment of Iran and its many limitations. I did not have the understanding which I gained later when I worked as a member of the editorial board. After I entered journalism and became a member of the editorial board, I became familiar with the intricacies, redlines and regulations of the newspaper industry. The danger did not force me to become conservative. If you compare all of my writings and articles, you will find that none of them contradicts the others. They are all based on the belief that government must be accountable to the people. I joined the profession of journalism based on this principle, and I often mentioned in my articles that journalists must always be ready to pay a price. We often criticized those who erred on the side of caution because they were not ready to pay a price. Unfortunately, during the reform period, the student movement and journalists who had joined the reform movement paid a price, but the leaders of the reform movement did not. This was the reason for the reform movement's failures.
3. The government became sensitive towards me in the summer of 2003, when the Zahra Kazemi incident occurred. At the time, I was the editor of the political section of *Etemad* newspaper. This was a sensitive and heavy post because this section served as a gateway for news and political analysis for the entire paper. When the Zahra Kazemi incident happened, the reformists represented the largest block in *Majlis*, but the reform movement had effectively been paralyzed. Both the government and the *Majlis* failed to take any decisive action, and there was a sense of confusion regarding the reform movement as a whole. It seemed like the reform was in some sort of a coma. The Zahra Kazemi incident awakened the reformists and revived the reform movement in the *Majlis*, government and society as a whole.
4. The reformist *Majlis* resolved to investigate the matter. The Article 90 Commission, which in my opinion was one of the most successful commissions in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the time, decided to prepare a report about Zahra Kazemi's case. The report was prepared. According to Iranian law, it had to be publicly read at a *Majlis* session within weeks of being presented. But the reading was delayed for almost two and half months. We wrote various articles in newspapers asking why the report had not been published. Finally, the report was put on the *Majlis*' agenda and was later presented on the *Majlis* floor. Radio stations also covered the event.
5. At that time, I was responsible for covering this event as a reporter and the political editor of *Etemad*. However, it became increasingly hard for us to cover this case after Mr. Saeed

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<sup>1</sup> Rasht is the capital of Gilan province in northern Iran and is the largest city along Iran's Caspian Sea coastline.

Mortazavi, the Tehran Prosecutor and the “Butcher of the Press,” was implicated in this case. He had his own way of putting pressure on the media so that they would not cover the issue or mention his name in connection with the case. I had dedicated one page of the newspaper to the *Majlis*’ report. Around 8:00-8:30 p.m. on the evening the report was read in front of the *Majlis*, Mr. Mortazavi contacted Mr. Behrouz Behzadi, the Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper, and warned that if we published the report he would reopen a pending case against the newspaper. Mr. Behzadi summoned me and said, “We have no choice but to refrain from publishing the report.” This happened to other newspapers as well, and the *Majlis*’ report was not published in any newspaper except for one. I think it was *Yas-e No*, which was affiliated with the *Mosharekat* party.<sup>2</sup> After it published this report, *Yas* was also shut down.

6. The next morning, the overwhelming absence of coverage regarding this event shocked everyone, especially the foreign press. One of my former colleagues called me from *RadioFarda* and asked me what was going on. I told him that Mr. Mortazavi had interfered in the process, as usual. This was a period during which everyone was afraid of Mortazavi and the shadow he cast. My former colleague asked: “Are you willing to go on record with this?” I announced my willingness. In my interview with *RadioFarda*, I said that at such and such hour Mortazavi called and threatened us, so we did not publish. Then I added that the Iranian Constitution does not allow him to act in such a manner, and that his actions were illegal. The *Majlis*’ report about Zahra Kazemi’s death had been broadcast via radio for everyone to hear, and the *Majlis* had already determined that the content of this report was not classified information.

### **The Summons from the Ministry of Intelligence**

7. Since I was the only journalist who was willing to go on record and say this, my words caused a lot of big backlash. Two to three days after the *RadioFarda* interview, the Ministry of Intelligence contacted the Managing Editor of my newspaper and informed him that they wanted to summon me. The Managing Editor then called me and told me that the Intelligence Ministry wanted to talk to me. He also said he told them that if they did not intend to detain me, they could go ahead and contact me. I was contacted by the Ministry of Intelligence and was told that they wanted to speak with me. I accepted and set an appointment for the following day.
8. The meeting was to be at the main office of the Ministry of Intelligence on Abuzar Ghaffari street. The Ministry of Intelligence usually interrogates individuals with political and cultural case files at this location. The next day I went to that office. A nice man with a pleasant demeanor approached me and guided me to a room. When I entered the room, I realized that it was an interrogation room. There was a table in the room, and on each side there were chairs.
9. He welcomed me. Then he reminded me that I had conducted an interview with *RadioFarda* in which I had spoken out against the Tehran Prosecutor, Mr. Mortazavi. He said that Mortazavi had complained to the Supreme National Security Council and alleged that I had violated the Council’s circular and libeled him by claiming that he had engaged in an illegal act.

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<sup>2</sup> *Mosharekat* is another name for the Islamic Iran Participation Front. This reformist political party was founded in 1998 after the election of President Khatami and was headed by the President’s brother, Mohammad-Reza Kathami.

10. The circular he was referring to had been issued few months before the Zahra Kazemi incident, and it stated that people who live in Iran or work for the Islamic Republic must not give interviews to foreign media—such as *RadioFarda*, *VOA*, and *Deutsche Velle*—because these outlets were working against the regime. The circular made no mention of the *BBC*.
11. I explained myself and said that I thought such behavior would negatively impact Mr. Mortazavi and the Judiciary. The interrogation lasted about three hours. The interrogator asked about my opinion regarding the reform movement and Mr. Khamenei. Marginal issues were also talked about, including questions which addressed rumors about me. For example, in the press someone had spread a rumor that I had been trained in psychological war by Saeed Hajjarian. I told him that I had only seen Mr. Hajjarian once in my life, and that was after his attempted assassination. Then I laughed and told him that their sources were unreliable and that they must reevaluate them; it was not good for the Ministry of Intelligence to rely on such bad sources. In the end, the Ministry merely gave me a verbal warning.

### **Press Censorship and the “Red Line”**

12. No one bothered me anymore and I went about my business. The end of that year coincided with the seventh *Majlis* elections. Issues surrounding the reform movement, protests, and support for the *Majlis* became front and center. As a journalist, I regularly interviewed foreign media without any problems. At the end of that year, I left *Etemad* for a variety of reasons. Some of my problems were related to the election and my disagreements with *Etemad's* Managing Editor. After the New Year, I joined Mr. Emad Baghi and *Jomhuriyat* newspaper, which had just begun operations.
13. Even before the situation with Zahra Kazemi, there were times when I had to self-censor. After the end of the golden age of the press and the closure of many newspapers, the regime sought to only allow newspapers they could control to have publishing rights. One of the changes that took place at that time was that Mortazavi (who was the head judge of the Press Court) was given the position of Tehran Prosecutor, which was an immensely important post. From that point on, Mortazavi began to control the press using different means. Sometimes things would happen that were very controversial and the government needed to react quickly. Mortazavi simply picked up the phone, called the newspapers and ordered them not to cover the news story. Mr. Mortazavi was one of the most important censors of the press in Iran. He always acted outside the law.
14. Every once in a while, the regime summoned the editors-in-chief of various newspapers for a meeting and explained the Red Line to them. This practice began during Mr. Khatami's era. All of a sudden the National Security Council, which is headed by the president, was turned into one of the most vigilant censors of the press in Iran. One of the complaints I had during Khatami's presidency was that he allowed a council, of which he was the head and in which the reformists had lots of influence, to effectively legalize censorship of the press. According to the Constitution, the Supreme National Security Council is responsible for making important policy decisions regarding national security issues. It does not have jurisdiction to decide details regarding which headline a newspaper should run or which words it should use. Unfortunately, however, this Council took it upon itself to assume such responsibilities during the time of Khatami's leadership.

15. During the reformist period, the bulk of censorship occurred on behalf of the regime, but the troubling practice of self-censorship also became a part of our daily lives. As the price of practicing journalism increased, more and more journalists became conservative in their outlook. Of course, there were those who did not pay any attention to these limitations, but many of the managing editors took note and thought it was better to remain active rather than be shut down. This phenomenon played a major role in self-censorship. Unfortunately, all those who were willing to pay a price were slowly removed from the journalist corps.
16. The frequency of contact by Mortazavi depended upon what was happening at the time. Sometimes he called every day. If something happened or someone was arrested and Mortazavi did not want there to be any coverage, he would call and request that there be no coverage. Around the time of the 18<sup>th</sup> of Tir<sup>3</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> of Khordad,<sup>4</sup> the situation was often very tense. The Prosecution Office had set up a system in which every newspaper office had a permanent point-of-contact. These contacts did not work for the Prosecutor's Office, but they did as they were ordered to by the Prosecutor. Over time, these contacts essentially became "little Mortazavis" inside the newspaper office, and they were responsible for the majority of censorship that went on in the office.
17. In my opinion, *Jomhuriyat* was one of the best newspapers during those years, even though it only published thirteen editions and was eventually shut down. This newspaper had gathered some of the best journalists of the time under one roof. All of these journalists were individuals who could not be controlled by Mortazavi. When Mortazavi felt that he could not control a situation, he was bent on nipping it in the bud. For example, *Nosazi* newspaper, which belonged to Mr. Jalaiपुर, only published two to three editions and was shut down. *Bonyan* newspaper published only four to five editions. Sometimes Mortazavi would shut down a newspaper that had not even published anything. *Arya* newspaper was supposed to relaunch operations but was shut down before it could do so.
18. A while ago, they shut down *Shahrvand-e Emrooz*. The team responsible for it decided to relaunch *Arya*. News of their decision circulated around the Internet. As soon as they began to take steps, they received orders prohibiting them from starting operations and informing them that the paper had been shut down. That same team then decided to publish a weekly called *Nimruz*, which operated under the direction of Mr. Haqshenas. The weekly had not yet been published and had only put out some advertising material so that its license would not be revoked. *Nimruz* was supposed to be published on a Sunday, but the Wednesday before that it was announced that the weekly had been shut down. Finally, the team was forced to publish its paper under the license of *Etemad Melli*—Mr. Karroubi's newspaper—since Karroubi was beyond the regime's reach.

### **The Political Environment Before Our Arrests**

19. During the time I worked for *Jomhuriyat*, several important events took place. One of them was the reopening of Zahra Kazemi's case file in court. I remember it well—our publication was shut down the day Zahra Kazemi's trial convened. The last headline of

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<sup>3</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> of Tir corresponds to July 9, 1999, when members of the Islamist vigilante group *Ansar-i Hizbullah* attacked a student dormitory at Tehran University. The attack caused the death of two students, and major student riots erupted throughout parts of Iran.

<sup>4</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> of Khordad corresponds to May 23, 1997, the day Khatami won the Iranian presidency with a landslide victory. 2<sup>nd</sup> of Khordad also refers to the reformist movement launched after Khatami's victory.

- our newspaper read: “The Thousand Page Case File,” and I was the author of the story. The only thing we had written was that the trial was to convene on that day. The only newspaper Mortazavi could not control was ours. For this reason, we were shut down even before Kazemi’s trial, so that the next day’s edition could not be published. Mortazavi had called before and threatened us, but the Editor-in-Chief and the editorial staff responded with: “We will publish—you can shut us down.”
20. Another important event during that time was the increased sensitivity of the Islamic Republic and the Judiciary vis-à-vis the internet. In the view of the Judiciary’s security forces, the Internet constituted a threat against national security. The regime was able to control the press and did so, but controlling the Internet was more difficult. They realized this during those early years (2002-03), when the Internet began to become popular in Iran. For example, we no longer used the news agency telex the way we did before. We simply relied on the Internet for our news.
21. Something else that happened then was the split that occurred inside the reformist movement. One of the camps, which included the *Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution* (MOIR), was more radical, and the other more conservative faction included figures such as Mr. Karroubi. The MOIR launched several news sites (because it did not have any publications at the time and its newspapers had been shut down). One of these sites was *Emrooz*, which analyzed news from the radical-reformist perspective. The regime was extremely sensitive vis-à-vis this site. Every once in a while I wrote articles for this site because I knew that I could not publish them in other newspapers for various reasons. Another popular site was *Gooya News*, in which I also published articles.

### My Arrest

22. Because of its sensitivity towards the Internet, the regime decided to control this medium at the root. First, they attacked *Emrooz* and *Rooydad* because they wanted to eliminate the MOIR. From the regime’s point of view, this organization had turned into a monster that had to be destroyed. Massoud Qurayshi, who was the webmaster of the *Emrooz* site, was the first person arrested. (Later, he was detained in the same prison we were.) Then they went after the person who had registered the site and the company who hosted the site. After that, they arrested all the employees and members of the board of directors of the company that hosted *Emrooz* (which included four to five young individuals who were about 24 to 25 years old). I do not remember the company’s name, but it was based in Tehran. Then they detained the person who was in charge of the marketing and advertising for the site. They effectively created a situation in which all of the Internet Service Providers (ISP) in Iran were under government control. It was no longer possible for anyone and everyone to set up an ISP and provide Internet services.
23. After dealing with the technical side of the issue, they began to focus on content. This is around the time they arrested me. Prior to grabbing me, agents had already arrested a few others, like Hanif Mazrui and Shahram Rafizadeh. Shahram Rafizadeh was my friend, and we hailed from the same city. He was the cultural editor of *Etemad*. We were also housemates for a long time. Shahram was arrested twenty days before I was. The attack on journalists and writers who wrote for various sites, in fact, began with the arrests of Hanif and Shahram. Hanif was the person who had registered *Rooydad*’s domain name, which belonged to the Islamic Iran Participation Front or *Mosharekat*. He was arrested for allegedly acting against the national security. They arrested Shahram after that. I was arrested in the fall of 2004.

24. Before I was arrested, *Jomhuriyat* had been shut down and I was unemployed. I had a gut feeling that they would come after me next, even though I was not very politically active. To the extent that Shahram and I were housemates, our cases were essentially intertwined. For this reason, a lot of people advised me to leave Iran. Even Shahram thought I would escape. Later, when I saw Shahram in prison, he asked: “Why did you not leave? I held out for 20 days so you would have time to leave.” (It took exactly 20 days for them to come after me. They had apparently used one of the prisoners who knew where I lived to identify our place of residence.)
25. I did not leave because I believed (and still believe) that I had committed no crime. Also, I had accepted the fact that if they grabbed Shahram, I too would be arrested. At around 8:00 a.m. on September 27, 2004, the doorbell rang. My wife opened the door. They said they had a few questions for me. I asked: “Who are you? Do you have a warrant?” They informed me that they had come from the Prosecutor’s Office and showed me a torn piece of paper, which they alleged was a warrant. The paper was folded over and on it, someone had written (in very poor handwriting) that my home was to be searched and that I was to be transferred to the detention facility. The warrant was not on official letterhead, nor did it contain a seal. There was nothing I could do, despite the fact that this torn piece of paper was not really a warrant. Warrant or not, they would do what they needed to do. It was similar to the situation of lawyers—having a lawyer or not having a lawyer during one’s detention made no difference in the Islamic Republic.
26. Two people entered the house. One was named Sabouri, and I have forgotten the other one’s name. Both were plainclothes officers affiliated with the intelligence office of the Law Enforcement Forces (or NAJA). (The intelligence office of NAJA had been delegated the authority of acting as judicial officers in our case file, and we were held in their detention facilities. NAJA’s intelligence officers later conducted interrogations under the supervision of the Prosecutor.) One of the officers who entered our home said: “I see that you write articles and provide interviews to anti-revolutionary radio stations working against the regime.” I responded: “Yes, I write articles but I have done nothing illegal.” He said, “We’ll see if you’ve done anything illegal or not.” Then he continued searching our home.
27. We lived in southern Tehran’s Gomrok neighborhood. Our house was very small. They searched the whole house: the kitchen, under the bed, and even inside the refrigerator ... they emptied all the folders which included my writings. They looked through photos and flipped through pages of books. One of the officers asked, “Where is your satellite dish?” I told him I did not have one. He was surprised and asked how this was possible. Owning a dish is a crime in Iran. When they cannot find anything suspicious, they usually arrest someone based on the fact that they own a dish. The search lasted about two hours. Then one of them announced that they were done. We left, and they took a bunch of my files and personal items with them. We sat inside a Paykan and they took me to the *Amaken* office on Motahari Street (previously known as Takht-e Tavoos).

### **Unlawful Detention and Interrogation**

28. Once we arrived, they took me to a room in the basement and told me to sit tight. I sat there for half an hour to an hour. No one came for me. After an hour, the door opened and a soldier entered and told me to get up. He took me to the *Amaken* yard. There was a van with tinted windows waiting there. He told me to go sit in the back of the van. This was the last time I saw a public street. I took a look at Motahari Street. It was crowded and

- people were going about their business. I had no idea what was going on and could not predict what was to happen. One of the officers took a napkin and blindfolded me. He tied my hands and pushed my head down behind the driver's seat. After about 15 to 20 minutes, the car stopped. The car door opened and someone grabbed my collar and ordered me to get out. I did. He took my hand and guided me to a staircase. When we reached the top of the staircase, he handed me over to another person who was the prison guard. The guard took me to another room and conducted a body search. He took away my street clothes and threw me inside a cell. I was still blindfolded. During the 60 days I was in detention, I was always blindfolded. I could only take my blindfold off when I was in the bathroom or inside my cell.
29. After only two minutes, he brought me out of the cell and took me to an interrogation room. This is one of their techniques—they do not give you any time to get accustomed to your new surroundings. The interrogator came in, stood behind me and ordered me to write down answers to the questions he posed. He took out some paper and instructed me to disclose all of my illicit sexual relationships.
  30. I wrote that I had not engaged in any illicit relationships, and handed the sheet back to him. He approached me and said, "Get up." As soon as I got up, he slapped me. He said, "Are you lying to me?" I said, "I have no reason to lie." He began beating me. Then he ordered me to sit down. He tore up the paper, brought out a new sheet and again ordered me to disclose all of my illicit relationships. He handed it over to me again, and again I wrote that I had had no illicit relationships. He said, "Are you being hard-headed? I responded: "But I haven't had any! You have brought me here and are accusing me of having illicit relationships. What is the charge? What is the crime?" Again, he ordered me to get up. He punched and kicked my stomach and chest several times. I hit the wall. I had never been beaten. To this day, the only beating I have ever received was while I was in prison. This interrogation lasted from 12 noon until 9 p.m. He kept requesting that I write down my illicit relationships, and I kept refusing. The beatings continued.
  31. After the second or third day, I figured out what time the food was delivered and when they took us to the bathroom. They took us to the bathroom during the three prayer time slots so we could perform our ablutions.
  32. On the second day, they took me for interrogation at 8 a.m. and returned me to my cell around 1 a.m. I was blindfolded. This was the worst day of interrogation. They drove me crazy. They constantly presented different papers that allegedly identified me as someone who had engaged in illicit relationships with others. I denied the allegations. When I failed to give him the answer he wanted, he beat me. The interrogator called for several guards and requested they bring over a baton. He did this to intimidate me—they never hit me with a baton or a whip. But he smashed my head on the table or against the wall.
  33. From the third day on, the duration of the interrogations decreased. I was usually taken around 8 a.m. and brought back at noon. They would take me again at 3 p.m. and return me by 5 p.m. They pursued the "illicit affair" angle for a week—for an entire week, every day, they asked me about my illicit relationships, I denied them and they beat me. I had never experienced such pressure. I was under an immense amount of physical and psychological stress. Finally, I reached the conclusion that there was no need for me to insist on denying this matter. It was better to admit the affairs and be rid of this abuse.

34. On the seventh day he asked the same question and I responded: “If this is your problem, then, yes—I have had illicit affairs.” He told me to write the names of the people involved. I told him not to worry about that, but I was eventually forced to write down the names of all my girlfriends from the time I was in middle school. He then asked me to identify the female journalists with which I had engaged in a relationship. I said, “None of them.” He said, “You have already accepted the fact that you had a relationship. Now you have to reveal who you had it with. How can you now deny this?” I replied: “I didn’t! Do you think a newspaper office is a whorehouse in which everyone has sex with everyone else? The interrogator then placed a list with the names of female journalists with whom I had a professional relationship over the years in front of me and said: “Which one of these did you have relations with?” I replied, “With none of them.” He showed me a series of confessions secured from other prisoners indicating that I had had relations with female journalists. Then he said: “These people have seen you do it and confessed.” I finally told him that I would agree to provide him with a name as long as he agreed to end this “illicit affair business.” He told me to write the names.
35. When I was the political editor of *Etemad*, there was a female journalist working there named K.H. K.H. was a very well-known journalist at the time and was responsible for reporting. I was closer to her than I was to the others, but our relationship was limited to casual conversation. We also went to several social gatherings together. On a couple of occasions, I accompanied her and her boyfriend to the Caspian Sea. We all stayed at my parents’ home. Because of this, some people spread rumors about us. The interrogator alleged that we had sexual relations with each other, but I denied it. He kept pressing. Finally, I told him I would accept this charge only if they left her alone. He told me to rest assured. Ms. K.H. had gotten married the previous year and had left journalism, and I assumed they would not go after her.
36. The interrogator asked me how many times I had engaged in illicit affairs. I asked him: “Why do you want to know how many times?” He had received the information he wanted, but he wanted more detail. I do not want to discuss the details here. I was extremely angry and told him I was embarrassed to speak of such things. I requested that he simply tell me what he wanted me to write down. He began to talk, and I wrote down his words. I put the piece of paper in front of him. He placed it at the edge of the table and said: “The things you have written will stay between the two of us. I won’t tell anyone about it, and I will not put it in your file.” Later, I learned that they copied and distributed my sexual confessions amongst themselves and got off on reading them. The same thing happened to others who had similar charges. The assumption was that when you admit to these allegations, you will break and refuse to put up resistance during the later stages of the interrogation process.
37. After a week of these events, he began to discuss political issues and requested that I reveal all of the illegal activities I was involved in. I wrote that I had done nothing illegal and was simply doing my job as a journalist. Like I said before, I had decided that resistance was futile. It was better for me to just repeat the allegations he made so I could get out of there. I could always deny them later. My interrogator threatened me and said that I would spend the next 20 years with them because of the serious charges I had. When you are in prison, you really start to believe these threats. Given the great amount of discretion provided to the Prosecutor by the Judiciary, they could basically do whatever they wanted to us. There were many examples of situations where the interrogator and the Prosecutor were able to detain someone for several years without any proof.



***The Spider House and Forced Confessions***

38. I was charged with eight counts. Three of them were non-political, and five were political in nature. The three non-political offenses included engaging in an illicit affair, drinking alcohol, and shaking hands with women.<sup>5</sup> I could not help but laugh at these charges. My political charges included actions against national security, participating in illegal demonstrations (even though I had not participated in any demonstrations, whether legal or illegal), membership in illegal organizations, insulting the Supreme Leader, disturbing the public mind by conducting interviews with anti-revolutionary media outlets, and propaganda against the regime. When they were extracting confessions from me they supplied me with little notes and instructed me to keep them in mind when I wrote my confession letters.
39. The newspaper *Kayhan* played a very important role in our case. During the first ten days of our detention, an editorial was published by *Kayhan* titled *The Spider House*. The morning this article was published the interrogator took me to the interrogation room, showed me a copy of *Kayhan*, and told me that Mr. Shariatmadari had written an article about us. The only article I received during my 60 days of detention was *The Spider House*. My interrogator's job was to force us to acknowledge the illegal activities described in that article during the course of our detention.
40. The article alleged that "Roozbeh M." and "Shahram R." were agents of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The term "spider house" referred to a series of agents working inside and outside the country who were working under the direction of the CIA and who implemented that Agency's projects. After the publication of this article, the interrogator insisted that whatever I wrote had to fit within the analytical framework of *The Spider House*. I was forced to synchronize my confessions with what had been written in the *The Spider House*. If you review our 200-page confessions, you will see that they have all been written based on *The Spider House*. This proved to us that *Kayhan* and its managing editor were involved in the regime's plans to extract confessions from us, and were, in fact, directing the whole affair. *The Spider House* contained the names of certain individuals who had not yet been arrested. Omid Memarian was one of them. About 40 to 45 days after my arrest, he was also detained.
41. One of the many cowardly acts committed by my interrogator was the summoning of Ms. K.H. As I mentioned before, Ms. K.H. wrote articles for several sites. They went after her but could not initially find her. They sent a summons to her father's home. Ms. K.H. went to the Prosecutor's Office accompanied by her husband. When she went there, she asked why she had been summoned. The head of the Prosecutor's Office, Mr. Saberi Zafarqandi (who was in charge of our case), apparently yelled at her and told her that she would be stoned because of the illicit affairs she had engaged in. The first document they put in front of her was my confession letter.
42. There was another lady who was associated with our case by the name of Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh. On the whole, our case (which went as far as the indictment stage) contained 21 indictees. But after Shahrudi's involvement and the controversy that ensued, all of the 21 individuals were exonerated except for Shahram Rafizadeh, Omid

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<sup>5</sup> In Islam it is forbidden for a man to have contact with women who are considered *namahram*. *Namahram* generally refers to women who are not related by blood or by marriage.

- Memarian, Javad Gholam Tamimi and me. No actual indictments were ever issued for them and they were released. It is important to note that from all of those 21 people, the only person who did not confess to what the authorities demanded was Massoud Qurayshi (who was the webmaster for *Emrooz*). Massoud was three to four years younger than I was. He did not accept any of the charges and took a lot of abuse as a result. He stayed in prison for 90 days. The rest of us decided to confess so we would be released.
43. Ten days after my arrest, my family went to see Mrs. Ebadi and she accepted to represent me. They sent the retainer letter to prison for me to sign, but the prison did not allow me to sign it. Retaining an attorney was my right as a prisoner. I was informed that Mortazavi had written a note saying that I could not sign the retainer letter or accept Ms. Ebadi as my attorney. The note added that if I signed the letter, they would add five more years to my sentence. (They also gave me a note which instructed me to reject the retainer because Mrs. Ebadi was an agent of Israel, used the issue of human rights to advance her own agenda, and fabricated lies against the regime.) They wanted me to declare that I did not want to be used by her, and that she was not competent enough to represent me. The text I was given had several obvious spelling errors, but I copied it as is (with the spelling errors) and signed it.
44. This incident actually worked to my advantage because when Mr. Seifzadeh (who was part of my first group of trial attorneys) saw the note I had written, he quickly realized that my situation was serious. During that time, the Journalists Union constantly planned protests and vigils for us. Mr. Seifzadeh went to one of these gatherings and told the Journalists Union that the note I wrote provides evidence that I was not being kept under normal circumstances. He said that it was unlikely that the political editor of a newspaper would have so many spelling errors. This issue later received quite a bit of press coverage.
45. Each of the four of us (Shahram, Omid, Javad and I) had specialized in or covered a particular area of journalism, and the interrogator forced us to confess to crimes with those specialties in mind. For example, I was a journalist who was active in the areas of civil rights, and I had to confess accordingly. Shahram and Javad had to confess to other things related to their areas of expertise. The regime was bent on launching a propaganda war. The elections were almost upon us and they wanted to use us against the reformists.
46. We were told that our trials would convene while we were in prison, and were instructed to defend our actions. So we wrote our “defenses” based on the scenarios we had been given and submitted them. Later, we realized that they had turned our writings into an indictment. They informed us that our trials would begin the following Monday. We repeatedly pleaded with them and told them that we should be released on bail, because if we were taken to trial from prison no one would believe our confessions—they would simply assume that they had been obtained under torture. We told them that if they wanted their scheme to be successful, they should release us and then begin the trials. We were eventually successful in persuading them that it was not best for them to take us to court directly from prison. They eventually released the other individuals but kept the four of us in that detention facility (which I think had about 30 to 35 cells).
47. Ten days before they released everyone else, they threw me and Shahram in a cell. This was another interrogation tactic they used. First, they separate two individuals who share similar circumstances so they can acquire information. When they sense they have extracted all the information they can from them, they put them in front of each other so they could monitor the conversations they have with one another. Shahram and I had

- been housemates for a long time, so we swapped stories and memories with each other but were careful not to provide them with anything they could later use against us.
48. Eventually they released everyone except for Shahram, Javad, Omid and me. Shahram and I were in one cell, and Omid and Javad in another. They told us not to worry, and assured us that we too would be released in a day or two. Waiting was really difficult during this time. The cells were small—about one meter by one and a half meters—which is exactly the size of a twin bed. Shahram and I were both living in that tiny cell. We complained a lot and asked them to transfer us to a bigger cell, but they refused.
49. Up to this point, we were held in a secret detention facility administered by the intelligence office of NAJA. The location of this facility was never officially disclosed. It was one of the prisons that was shut down after our case was publicized. Finally, they said that they would transfer us to Evin. By this point, I had been in captivity for 54 days. I had been blindfolded for the duration of this time.
50. The four of us were transferred to Evin, along with Fereshteh Ghazi and Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh. They took the two women to the women's ward, and housed us in a series of newly built "suites" that were erected during Mr. Shahroudi's time. During Shahroudi's time, some changes occurred inside the prison system and it was decided that solitary cells should no longer be used. As a result, they joined two solitary cells, added a shower and kitchenette, and called it a "suite." When international human rights monitors came to visit Iran's prisons, they were shown these cells. There are around 100 to 150 of these "suites" in Evin prison. They are located on the fourth floor of Section 9.
51. During one of the last days of our detention, they summoned us, gave us the text of our defense, and told us to prepare ourselves for trial. The agreement we had reached with our interrogator and Mr. Mortazavi was that we would synchronize our defense with what was written in *The Spider House*, and expose the behind-the-scenes plans of the reformists. In return, they would release us. But they were unable to find a judge who was willing to go along with their plans. So after several days, their plans changed. They summoned us one by one and told us that they would free us on bail if we agreed to publish our confession letters after release.
52. But the real reason for our release was something else. My wife and family were following our case and were constantly visiting different officials. My wife was able to speak to Shahroudi during one of his public meetings. She had told Shahroudi that I was a young journalist and that we had just gotten married. She requested that we be released on bail. Shahroudi had asked Mr. Alizadeh, head of Tehran's Judiciary, to change my order of detention to release on bail. At the time, I did not know anything about this. Despite this, the Prosecutor's Office only allowed our release on the condition that we confess.

### **Mortazavi's Grand Plan**

53. I was released on November 26 (or 27), around 7 p.m. The condition of this release was that I write the text Mr. Mortazavi had asked for and present it as a confession letter to be published by various media outlets. The second prisoner would be released when my letter was published, and then he had to write his confession letter in order for the third person to be released, and so on. It was essentially a form of hostage-taking conditioned upon our signing these confession letters. Unfortunately, I was the first person who was released. It was difficult. When someone is released from prison in Iran everyone thinks he is a hero, but when the issue of confession letters comes up the hero suddenly turns into a villain. It is very difficult to accept this reality.

54. I was released and arrived at my in-laws' home around 9:00-9:30 p.m. Several friends came to visit me and we were together until around 2 a.m. No one knew what was going to happen during the next few days. Next morning, at around 10 a.m., the interrogator (whose pseudonym was Keshavarz) called me and asked if I had written my confession letter. I said I had not. He ordered me to meet him at Azadi square; he had something he wanted to talk to me about.
55. I went to Azadi square with my wife. He came and asked me to sit inside his car. He asked me why I had not written the letter yet. I told him that I had only been released the night before. I asked that he let me relax a little bit before I began writing. He replied: "No, that's not possible. Omid, Shahram and Javad are relying on you." I agreed. He then took a piece of paper out of his pocket and told me that "Hajj Aqa" wants me to write about these specific issues. Hajj Aqa meant Mortazavi. He said, "Write these things in your confession letter. I will meet you close to your in-laws' home this afternoon and collect the letter from you."
56. I went home and began writing. I addressed it to the heads of the three branches: Mr. Khatami, Haddad Adel and Shahroudi. The interrogator collected the letter from me in the evening. It was a horrible situation and no one knew what was going to happen. I could not tell any of my friends because I was worried that I would expose the plot and cause problems for the other three who were still in prison (and were now my responsibility).
57. The next day or two days after that, the interrogator called me again and asked me why I had not published the letter. I told him that I had given him the letter and they should publish it themselves. But he disagreed and said that Hajj Aqa wanted me to take it to the news agencies and publish it myself. I agreed, and told him that I was going to northern Iran to visit my parents (whom I had not yet seen), and that I would fax the letter to several media outlets prior to leaving. Before departing, I faxed the letter to the *Iranian Labor News Agency* (ILNA) and the *Iranian Students News Agency* (ISNA), two outlets who were close to the reformists.
58. Two or three days passed. I was in Rasht when the interrogator contacted me. He called my wife's cell phone and started yelling and asking why I had not yet published the letter. He reminded me that my friends were still waiting in prison. I told him that I had faxed it and was not responsible for its publishing and distribution. He said, "No, you need to follow up with this. Come to Tehran right now—Hajj Aqa needs to talk to you." Next morning we went back to Tehran. We were close to Karaj when one of my newspaper colleagues sent a text message and informed me that one of the outlets had published my confession letter. He asked if this was true. I told him it was, but that he should not take it seriously. I had sent the letter to ILNA and ISNA, but because they were sympathetic to the reformist cause, they had not published it. Apparently, Mortazavi had personally faxed the letter to *Fars News Agency* (which was sympathetic to the Judiciary) and they had published it. The news of the confession letter spread quickly around Tehran. People began to criticize me and talked behind my back, but I could not speak the truth to anyone.
59. Mortazavi called most of the newspapers I had worked for (and other reformist papers) and ordered them to publish the letter on their front page, with a catchy title such as "Exposed!" or "The Confessions of a Reformist Journalist." He completely destroyed my reputation. On the evening of the letter's publication, Omid and Shahram were released from prison. They had prepared similar confession letters in prison, and upon release they

presented them to various media outlets for publication. We could not show our face among reformist journalists because everyone looked at us with a critical eye. The situation was really bad.

60. When our letter was published, Mr. Rajab Ali Mazrui, whose son was detained with us and similarly pressured, wrote a letter to Mr. Khatami saying that the letters published by us showed that we were under pressure. He requested that Khatami further investigate the situation. This letter had both positive and negative effects. Negative, because as soon as the letter was published we were summoned to the Prosecutor's Office in Tehran (Mortazavi's office) and forced to respond to Mr. Mazrui's allegations. Mr. Mortazavi believed that Mr. Mazrui's letter could be damaging, and ordered us to write a letter refuting his allegations and explaining how well we were treated in prison. Javad was still in prison, and Mortazavi said that if we refused to write a letter, he would remain in prison.
61. We begrudgingly accepted his order. The three of us wrote a letter claiming that the things Mr. Mazrui had written about us were lies. We denied the fact that we were held in solitary confinement and that we were tortured. Then we thanked the Judiciary for having given us this opportunity to think about our mistakes and make amends. We signed the letter and faxed it to Mortazavi's office and *Fars News Agency*. A little while later, someone called from Mortazavi's office and we were summoned yet again. We went to Mr. Mortazavi's office in Arg Square. Mortazavi was upset that we had thanked the Judiciary (in light of the fact that the Prosecutor's Office was under criticism at the time). He concluded that the letter should not be published.

### **Our Televised Confessions**

62. We did not know this, but during our discussions with Mortazavi he had actually called and invited journalists and reporters from various TV stations to interview us in the hall outside his office. This is how we came to give our televised confessions. No one discusses *where* these interviews actually took place—all they talk about is the fact that we gave televised interviews.
63. Before we left Mortazavi's office, he summoned our family members in his office one by one and threatened them. When my wife and Omid's mother were leaving his office, we noticed that Omid's mother was crying and was very upset. We were all worried. What had caused her to cry this way? When we entered Mortazavi's office, he began threatening us. He said, "The operation unit is downstairs—I can just call them and have them come take you away." Then he said, "When you walk outside, there will be reporters waiting for you. Tell them the things you were going to talk about in court and in your letters about Mr. Mazrui." He explained that he had ordered Javad to be brought from prison too so he could be present at the press conference. Then he took out a few sheets of paper and told me that during my interview I should mention that four members of Mr. Mazrui's relatives were members of the *Mojahedin-e Khalq*<sup>6</sup> and had been executed. But I told him I would not get involved with Mr. Mazrui's personal life, and that I would only comment on the lies he told and talk about the fact that we were never held in solitary confinement or tortured.
64. When we walked out of the investigation room, we realized the full extent of what was going on! One of the reformist reporters who was a colleague passed by me and quietly

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<sup>6</sup> The *Mojahedin-e Khalq*, not to be confused with the *Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution* (a reformist party), is an Islamist political party influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology. It has been banned in Iran since the early days of the revolution.

- said that they had arranged it such that none of the reformist outlets would ask us questions. *Fars News Agency* was also there. In the beginning, everyone was quiet and no one asked any questions. We made the mistake of asking why no one was asking any questions. Shahram Rafizadeh pointed to a man named Fazel, who worked for *Fars News Agency* and was often seen at the Prosecutor's Office, to start the questioning. Finally, Fazel and the rest of the conservative media outlets began asking questions and we said what we were supposed to say. They filmed the whole thing and broadcast it on the news repeatedly.
65. In Iran television is a very effective medium. One time I was sitting in the back of a car in Azadi Square and another driver kept driving past our car. At the time I was suspicious of everyone and thought everyone was after me. Suddenly he opened the car door and asked, "Excuse me, but aren't you the one who was on television last night?" I said yes. Very nicely, he asked, "Has your problem been resolved?" I said, "Not yet, but God willing it will be." He then wished me success and left. It was very interesting for me that this ordinary guy understood our difficult circumstances better than my open-minded journalist friends.
66. Up to this point, we had paid a hefty price and our reputation had suffered greatly. Mr. Mortazavi had promised that he would drag us in the mud and make sure that we could never return to our previous profession. After this press conference, the interrogator contacted me every day (or every other day) and told me that someone had written something and it was necessary for me to write a response. This was a kind of psychological torture for me.
67. Shahram, Omid and I would get together around 7:30-8:00 p.m. in a Tehran café every night and analyze the news published about us. Abtahi wrote an article about us called "Repentant and Unrepentant Bloggers," in which he portrayed us as cowards. We were fed up, and we decided it was time to turn the tables. We decided to contact and meet with Mr. Khatami through Mr. Ramezanzadeh (who was a spokesperson for the government). However, no one would dare tell Mr. Khatami that these "repentant bloggers" wanted to see him. This is where the letter Mazrui had written to Khatami became useful to us. Based on the information in the letter, Khatami had ordered the Constitutional Watch Committee to investigate Mr. Mazrui's claim. The Committee invited seven or eight of the "unrepentant bloggers" to discuss their allegations. Those bloggers had gone and talked to the Committee, described the treatment they received, and lodged their complaints. In his weblog, Mr. Abtahi wrote an article about the meeting and what transpired during it.
68. Following the article Abtahi wrote, Mortazavi called us into his office. Unfortunately, I was the only one in town. He said that the "unrepentant bloggers" had gone before Khatami's unlawful Committee and lied. He asked us to go before the Article 90 Commission of the *Majlis* (which at the time was controlled by the conservative establishment) and lodge our own complaints. He handed me a letter. I copied it, returned the original to him, and left his office. As soon as I got home my phone rang. I answered. Someone said, "I am Shayanfar, Hassan Shayanfar, calling from *Kayhan* newspaper." *Kayhan* has a column titled "The Hidden Half" that belongs to the *Kayhan* research center. Hassan Shayanfar (who along with Hossein Shariatmadari, are known as "Brother Hassan" and "Brother Hossein" and had become infamous during the time of the Chain Murders) worked in this section. He informed me that a few minutes ago he received a letter addressed to the Article 90 Commission and wanted to talk to me about it. I got angry and said, "Excuse me, but I gave that letter to the Tehran Prosecutor. What is it doing at *Kayhan*? I have no opinion regarding this and have nothing to say. You are not allowed to publish the letter because it is addressed to the Article 90 Commission and

they are the ones who are responsible for investigating the matter.” Then I hung up. Two days passed and no matter how many times they called, I refused to talk to them.

69. After the meeting of the “unrepentant bloggers” with the Committee (and the publication of news regarding the meeting), Mr. Mortazavi had called the head of the Committee, Dr. Hossein Mehrpour, and asked why they had invited the “unrepentant bloggers” and listened to their lies. He informed Mehrpour that the “repentant bloggers” had complained against the Committee and alleged that it had published lies. He then told Mehrpour that based on these complaints, the Prosecutor’s Office would further investigate the matter unless the Committee also invited the “repentant bloggers” and listened to their side of the story. Mehrpour said that he had no problem with that request, and would invite the repentant group and listen to what they had to say. Mortazavi then scheduled the meeting for the next Saturday without consulting any of us.

### **Our Meeting with the Constitutional Watch Committee**

70. On Saturday around 11:30-12:00 p.m., the interrogator called me from Mortazavi’s office and asked me to go there. I told him I could not and offered him various excuses. Suddenly, he angrily said: “Get up and come here—you have to go in front of the Committee!” When he said this, I realized what was going on and said that I will try to wrap things up. I hung up and turned off my cell phone. I called Omid on my wife’s cell. I told him to come to Enqelab Square, and said we needed to talk. Once we got there I told Omid what was going on. I said that I thought the “committee” the interrogator spoke of was the Constitutional Watch Committee, and that I thought they were planning to deal with us in the same manner they dealt with us when we conducted the press conference. However, since we were also looking for an opportunity to meet with Khatami and tell him the truth, we decided to take advantage of this opportunity. Omid agreed and said he would accompany me. It was about noon on Saturday. I called Abtahi’s office and asked if the Committee had a meeting that day and if our name was on the agenda. Abtahi rudely answered in the affirmative, and told us he thought the meeting was scheduled for 2 p.m. I asked him where the meeting was to be held, and he answered “the Office of the President, on Pasteur Street.”
71. Around 2 p.m. we arrived at the Office of the President for our meeting with the Committee. We introduced ourselves and informed them that we had been invited to a session today. Omid, Solmaz (my wife) and I went to the room where the Committee was to meet, and with Mehrpour’s permission, went inside. The members of the Committee were all trained lawyers. Abtahi (the legal advisor), Shushtari (the Minister of Justice), Amini (a member of the governing committee of the *Majlis*), a cleric who was a member of the Assembly of Experts, and a group of law professors were present at the meeting. We sat around the table in order to facilitate discussion. Shushtari said that Mortazavi had called and said something had come up for us and cancelled the meeting. I told him the following: “Let me explain. We have decided to talk about things that we have never spoken about, and we put our trust in you.” Before I could begin speaking, Shushtari and Mehrpour chimed in and said: “Wait a second.” Shushtari then said: “Look, if you think that what you are about to say will have negative consequences for you or cause you trouble, know that we cannot guarantee your safety. You have to be willing to stand by anything you tell us.”
72. I got very angry and said, “I am really sorry that we are sitting in the presence of three government ministers who say such things and can’t guarantee our safety. But it’s not

- important to us. We realize that as soon as we walk out of this building there will be trouble.” And, indeed, that is exactly what happened.
73. Mehrpour saw that I got upset and said: “OK, OK. Calm down. We will listen to what you have to say.” I told them that before I began I wanted to preface our talk by telling them why we are here and what we want to talk about. Then I continued: “It’s not important to us what happens to us. The only thing that is important is that you are the President’s confidants, and as long as the President knows what happened to us, that is sufficient.” We began to speak. We explained the method of our arrest, our treatment, our interrogations, and the fact that we were essentially held hostage. They simply listened, incredulously. Sometimes when we explained the way they interrogated and treated us, they reacted angrily.
74. At some point Omid wanted to tell them, in detail, about his interrogation and torture. But when he remembered that Solmaz (the only female) was present, he said, “There is a woman present. I cannot speak of such things.” So I requested that Solmaz leave the room for several minutes so that we could speak frankly. Solmaz left the meeting and we were able to speak openly about the things the interrogator told us and did. At the end of the session, we told them that we knew that Mr. Mortazavi and his deputies would confront us, but that we were ready to pay a price.
75. The meeting came to an end and all the members of the Committee were extremely upset. I have a picture of the scene at the time, which was taken by Abtahi on his cell phone. In the picture you can clearly see that we are upset; our eyes are red; Omid is speaking and I am drinking water.
76. When the meeting ended, Mehrpour thanked us and asked if we wanted news of the meeting to be published. We told him that because there was a third person involved who was not there (Shahram was in northern Iran and could not attend), and because the costs associated with publicizing our meeting were very high, we preferred it if Shahram also had an opportunity to come and share his story. Mehrpour agreed and said he would wait 24 hours—until 9 a.m. the next day—for Shahram to come and talk to him. We sent Shahram a message but he did not come.
77. For a week after the meeting, we could not go home. In the mornings we would take strolls in the streets, and at night we would randomly go to an unknown friend’s home. Everyone who knew us had received phone calls telling them we should turn ourselves in. Even the person who had posted my bail was eventually summoned.
78. Twenty-four hours passed and the pressure became unbearable for Omid and me. Abtahi was constantly sending me text messages saying it was best to publish the news. His view was that at the time the pressure was all on Omid and my shoulders, and that as soon as the news was published, the pressure would be distributed between the two of us and the Committee. We accepted and decided to make the issue public. Mortazavi, too, had found out about it and kept sending messages suggesting we turn ourselves in. In one of his messages to us he warned us that plenty of people in Iran died in traffic accidents, and that we could be two such people. He had specifically told Shahram, who has three young children, that he was risking his children’s lives.
79. I called Mr. Mehrpour and agreed to allow him to publish the news. Until that point, nothing had been published. We were known as the “repentant bloggers,” and it was



rumored that we were agents of the interrogators in prison and that we were cooperating with the Prosecutor's Office. Mehrpour talked to the members of the Committee over the phone and informed me that they had agreed to publish the news. In addition, he told me that Mr. Abtahi had agreed to give an interview in connection with these events. About half an hour after, Mr. Abtahi conducted an interview with ISNA and said that the group that the Prosecutor claimed would tell the truth had actually denied their confessions and shared their experiences in prison. That night, Abtahi published a large portion of what we had said in the meeting on his weblog. The media's attitude towards us suddenly changed, and everyone declared us heroes.

### **Our Meeting with Ayatollah Shahroudi**

80. That night, the head of the Committee gave his report to Khatami, in which he wrote that according to their investigations and what the two of us had said, we were tortured, put under pressure and held in solitary confinement—and that all of these actions violated the Constitution. That day or the next day, Mr. Khatami called Mr. Shahroudi, explained the report's findings, and said that his investigations show that such events actually took place and that the Prosecutor's Office (which had acted under Shahroudi's supervision) had committed these transgressions. Shahroudi did not accept these allegations in the beginning, and claimed that they were lies intended to create trouble for the government. At the end of the conversation, Khatami had apparently told Shahroudi that even if ten percent of the allegations were true, their government was in trouble. Shahroudi promised Khatami that he would investigate the claims. This was how Shahroudi entered our case.
81. Mr. Shahroudi secretly assigned one of his deputies to investigate our case and meet with us. One of the guys who was in prison with us called and asked to meet us. From our meeting place, he took me to Jordan Street so we could meet with Mr. Ziaifar, a human rights activists and the head of the Islamic Human Rights Commission.
82. In any case, at around 8 p.m., we met up with some other guys and got in a car to go meet with Ziaifar. The car went towards Evin. Behind Evin there is a building that is known as *Hasht Behesht* and belongs to the office of the Judiciary. The car stopped there. It was about 8:00-8:30 p.m. and all the offices were closed. There were seven or eight of us, and we went inside one of the offices and sat down. Two people walked in. Only one of them introduced himself. (I will not name him here.) He said: "I have been secretly ordered by Shahroudi to meet with you in hiding and determine what happened to you." That night, we spoke to that deputy for about five and a half hours and individually explained our case files and presented our documents. For example, I had brought my blindfold from prison and showed it to him. In the circular that Mr. Shahroudi had issued (that later became the Citizens Rights Law), use of a blindfold and solitary confinement was outlawed. That gentleman later told us that when he went home that night, he suffered a severe headache and was terribly troubled by the things that had happened under the supervision of the Judiciary.
83. The day before we met with this fellow, the person who had posted my bail received a summons which he secretly sent me. I intended to go to the Prosecutor's Office with my attorney the day after our evening meeting with the unnamed individual. That night, I informed Shahroudi's deputy that I had received a summons and planned on going to the Prosecutor's Office tomorrow, at which point I would likely be arrested. I wanted him and Mr. Shahroudi to be aware of the situation. He said that I should write a letter to Mr.

Shahroudi and that he would give it to him. I wrote a letter to Shahroudi that night and explained the summons and the possibility of being dealt with harshly.

84. That morning, I went to the Prosecutor's Office along with Mrs. Ebadi, Omid, and Omid's attorney to turn myself in. They made us wait for three to four hours and treated Ms. Ebadi with extreme disrespect. Around 1:30-2:00 p.m. they finally let us in. I spoke to the interrogator in very calm fashion—I did not think there was anything he could do. They did not arrest us. They simply asked us a series of questions, and I proceeded to retract all my previous confessions. I noted that these writings had been obtained under pressure and now that I am free, I intended to reject all of them.
85. The next day, they called me from Shahroudi's deputy's office again and told me to come in if I had the time. Omid and I went to his office. He said that he had given Shahroudi his report and Shahroudi had become very angry. He also said that Shahroudi had requested to meet with us. We set an appointment for Wednesday, between 4 to 5 p.m. He then advised us to coordinate things with the other members of our group who wished to meet Shahroudi. We gathered everyone in a café that evening, brought them up-to-date, and coordinated what each of us was to talk about during that one hour meeting. We also planned on meeting two hours before the meeting at Naderi Café on Jomhuri Street. Finally, on December 31, 2004, we went and met with Mr. Shahroudi. The meeting lasted two hours, which was longer than the allotted time. Mr. Shahroudi rescheduled his meeting at the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution out of respect for us.
86. Each one of us was responsible for talking about certain issues. I spoke very harshly and aggressively. I started off by admitting that, prior to today's meeting, I was under the impression that everything Mr. Mortazavi did was done pursuant to Shahroudi's direct orders, and that Shahroudi was aware of everything that was going on. I then expressed satisfaction at the opportunity we had to clear things up with Shahroudi, and told him that it was now clear to us that Mortazavi often acted independently—and that his actions had negative consequences for Shahroudi and the Judiciary. I also referred to several of Mortazavi's quotes, including his claim that "I could do whatever I want—I am one quarter of this country!" When I mentioned this, Shahroudi laughed and with a smile said: "It's a good thing he's satisfied with just a quarter!" Shahroudi then noted that after our arrest, Mortazavi presented some documents suggesting that we had insulted the clerical establishment in our blogs. He cited the example of a picture which showed Jennifer Lopez's head on the body of a cleric. Mortazavi had placed blame directly on me and the others for this. I got angry and replied: "I am really sorry for you. You are the head of the Judiciary, but your source of information and decision-making is Mr. Mortazavi. He is telling you these things in order to cover up his actions. You are, after all, an Ayatollah and the clerical establishment is a sensitive subject for you. Mortazavi has merely said these things so you would come to the conclusion that it is necessary to go after us. And you have believed him." I also spoke about the hostage situation Mortazavi had created by forcing us to publish our own confession letters. Then I added that Mortazavi sent us messages reminding us that many people die as a result of traffic accident every day, and that I could be one of them. When Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh and the other women talked about their experiences with interrogations, Shahroudi became very upset. Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh said, "Hajj Aqa, I have a daughter who has come of age and wants to get married. They accused me of having an affair and asked me to explain it." Shahroudi responded by telling us that even if we had sinned and had committed these alleged sexual acts, there was no reason to question us about it. He said questioning a sinner about his sins is a deadly sin in and of itself. When the meeting was

- over and Shahroudi got up to go perform his prayers, Shahram asked Shahroudi for advice regarding what we should do. He told Shahroudi that Mortazavi was still holding them hostage and harassing them. He also reminded Shahroudi that Mortazavi had threatened his children.
87. As he was leaving, Shahroudi said something that, according to members of the Judiciary, is unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic. He said: "If anyone, from anywhere, calls you and summons you and says they need to discuss something with you, do not obey them or answer them. Simply tell them that your case is being handled by Hajj Aqa, and that they should follow up with me." He then told us to "go live our lives, and to not worry about these matters." These words calmed us. Because of what Shahroudi said, I was essentially immune from arrests while I was in Iran. After this meeting, we went back to our lives and no longer sensed the danger of arrest and possible detention.
88. The day after the meeting, Shahroudi had summoned Mortazavi and asked him to hand over all the case files pertaining to us. Mortazavi collected all the cases from the Prosecutor's Office and handed them to Shahroudi. Shahroudi told him that he was not to work on them any longer. Then Shahroudi formed a three-member committee to investigate the validity of the cases. One of the members of this committee was Jamal Karimi-Rad, who was the Judiciary spokesperson at the time. Karimi-Rad was later killed in a traffic accident. The committee's investigation took three to four months.
89. We were free, but we could not find work anywhere. Every time we found work somewhere, Mortazavi would put pressure on the Managing Editor to let us go. The last newspaper I was able to work for (for a period of only one month) was Mr. Karroubi's newspaper. Even my wife lost her job as a result of Mortazavi's pressure. He wanted to paralyze us.

### **My Conviction and Sentence**

90. A few months later, Shahroudi's committee issued their opinion. The committee exonerated everyone in the bloggers case files except for the four of us (Omid, Shahram, Javad and me). It concluded that because we had actually been indicted by the Prosecutor's Office, our cases had to go to court before we could be exonerated. So they opened another case file for us and sent the file to the courts. In February 2009, the lower court issued a sentence of two years and eighty-four lashes for me. I still have three non-political charges which are currently under investigation.
91. My wife and I left Iran for Europe on August 15, 2006, and came to the United States in November of that year.

## Omid Memarian

Omid Memarian is an Iranian journalist and blogger. Memarian received his bachelor's degree in metallurgy from the Islamic Azad University.

In 2003, Memarian was awarded the Golden Pen at the National Press Festival in Iran. He has worked with many daily newspapers in Iran such as *Hayat-e No*, *Yas-e No*, *Vaqaye-e Ettfaqiyeh* and *Shargh*. Memarian is also known for his regular news pieces for IPS (Inter Press Service), and his op-ed pieces for *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He also regularly blogs for *The Huffington Post*.



Omid Memarian

Memarian was arrested on October 10, 2004, for his allegedly illegal cyber-journalist and blogging activities. He spent the next month and a half in detention. His charges included membership in illegal groups, propaganda against the regime and spreading lies. The Prosecutor of Tehran, Saeed Mortazavi, released him only after he and other bloggers agreed to publish their forced confessions in various newspapers. On February 4, 2009, Memarian was sentenced (*in absentia*) to two years, six months' imprisonment and ten lashes.

Memarian left Iran in 2005 and received Human Rights Watch's highest honor that year, the Human Rights Defender Award. In 2005-06, he was a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. From 2007 to 2009, he was a World Peace Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism.



### Witness Statement of Omid Memarian

**Name:** Omid Memarian

**Place of Birth:** Tehran, Iran

**Date of Birth:** May 28, 1974

**Occupation:** Journalist

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**Interviewing Organization:** Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

**Date of Interview:** August 6, 2009

**Interviewer:** IHRDC Staff

**Witnesses:**

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This statement was prepared pursuant to an in-person interview with Mr. Omid Memarian. The statement consists of 66 paragraphs and 13 pages. The interview was conducted on August 6, 2009. The statement was approved by Mr. Memarian on September 10, 2009.

## Witness Statement

### My Arrest

1. I was arrested on October 10, 2004, at my office in Tehran. Four police officers came to my office and arrested me without producing a summons or arrest warrant. They were armed and made a point of showing their weapons to me. I decided to go along with them so I would not disturb my colleagues. When I went downstairs, I noticed a van parked at one end of the street and a Paykan<sup>1</sup> parked at the other. I assume they were waiting for me to arrive to work so they could arrest me.
2. They did not explain the reason for my arrest. They told me we were headed to court, but instead they first took me to my home and searched my room. They searched all my personal items and documents and confiscated them. I was sitting in the van when they brought my computer and placed it in the van. Again, they assured me that we were on our way to court.
3. On the way there, they forced me onto the floor of the car and threw a blanket on top of me. One person placed his foot on my neck. I could not see anything. They took me to a detention facility that was inside the city. I did not know where it was, but I found out later that it was around Mohseni Square. This illegal detention facility belonged to the Law Enforcement Forces (or NAJA).

### The Secret Detention Facility

4. When we arrived at the detention facility, I was able to sneak a peak from underneath my blindfold. I noticed that the detention center was inside a one-level residence and was not very large. It had eight rooms. Some were solitary cells, and a few were interrogation rooms. Five cells were located next to each other on one side, and the others were on the opposing side.
5. In this facility, detainees did not have the right to speak to each other. The lights in the prison were almost always on. During the first two weeks, the light in my room was on the entire time. The prisoners were taken to the bathroom three times every twenty-four hours—once in the morning, once at noon, and once during the evening call to prayer. If we needed to use the bathroom at any other time we had to do our business inside our food container. It was difficult to deal with this limitation the first few days because my body was not used to it, but I slowly adjusted myself to the schedule.
6. Prisoners were taken to the bathroom four at a time. I soon realized that other journalists, like Roozbeh Mirebrahimi and Shahram Rafizadeh, were in this prison too because I saw them during my bathroom visits. Sometimes we saw each other half-naked—it was very humiliating. The door to the shower room was open and a camera was placed in front of it. I was taken to bathe on the sixteenth day of my imprisonment.
7. When I was taken in for interrogation or to the bathroom, I could hear other prisoners being interrogated and beaten. I did not know if they were political prisoners or criminals. (This detention facility was apparently used to detain regular criminals as well.)

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<sup>1</sup> The Paykan is a car domestically manufactured in Iran.

**Unlawful Interrogations and Beatings**

8. As soon as I entered the detention facility, I was insulted, kicked, cursed at and thrown in a solitary cell. Two hours later, the interrogations began. I was taken from my cell to the interrogation room with a blindfold on. They tried to terrify me from the outset. The interrogator started insulting and beating me. He said, “You are a traitor. We will take care of you here. You will never leave.” I tried to request an attorney, but the interrogator interrupted and said: “No attorneys!” He continued on with his threats: “We will keep you here and force you to stop your activities. If you try to resist, you will be crushed.” Then he told me that they needed to cleanse society of dirty elements like us, and ordered me to “write down a list of the shits [I] had been up to during the past years.” I listed my activities for the past years. The interrogator said they already knew everything about me but wanted me to admit my wrongdoings. Later, I realized that they actually knew very little about me because the interrogations solely focused on the confessions I made in writing (and the information they had forcibly extracted from my friends and colleagues).
9. The interrogations resembled a game and were always conducted in a small room, which was about two meters by ninety centimeters. During this “game,” the interrogator initially asked me to list all of my activities and required me to submit the list to him. I wrote down things such as the newspapers I had worked with, the year(s) I worked for them, when I started my weblog, when I went to trips abroad, etc. Then the interrogator would begin asking me questions based on what I had written.
10. I was usually summoned for interrogation very early in the morning, at around 7 a.m. (and sometimes even as early as 5 a.m.). They asked questions repeatedly and often claimed that I was not telling the truth. I assured them that I was speaking the truth and that I was telling them the whole story, but the interrogator insisted that I was withholding information. They exerted a lot of psychological pressure on me. I would get very sick and my mind would not cooperate. I did not know what to say. I was under so much physical and psychological stress that sometimes I could not speak. My lips would not move out of fear, and nothing would come to my mind. I knew they simply wanted me to agree to everything they alleged. This was their plan all along.
11. They beat me on several occasions. Two to three people beat me at once. They hit my head against the wall. The wall was covered with a special kind of surface that was supposedly not very hard—but it hurt nonetheless. Sometimes the interrogator threw me off the chair and kicked me while I was down. At other times, he placed his foot on my head. It was all terribly demeaning. One time I remember falling to the floor. He kicked me very hard in the stomach and I became very nauseous. I exaggerated and pretended like my intestines were coming out of my throat, so he let up a bit.
12. They wanted me to confess to things that I did not know (and still do not know) about. The case they were building against us was completely fabricated. They always asked me about other people and wanted me to write about them. They wanted to extract confessions from me against the reformists. They were essentially guiding us towards their political objectives, which were based on previously designed or staged scenarios.
13. Ten days before I was arrested, *Kayhan* newspaper published an article called *The Spider House*. I soon realized that my interrogators wanted me to admit to the crimes that *Kayhan* had alleged we were responsible for. The role they wanted me to play was that of a manipulated journalist who wrote articles under the influence of the reformists and

- attempted to damage and weaken the regime. The scenario they set up for us required us to confess to various anti-government activities we did with the aim of destroying the regime's image. We had to admit that the material we wrote was not in reality ours; that it was written at the behest of reformists, and that we engaged in anti-government activities under their influence because we wanted to bring about a "velvet revolution." And that some of our activities, including accusations we made against high-ranking officials, actually endangered the national security. Every part of the interrogation process was professionally orchestrated and designed to meet their political objectives. It did not matter that the scenario they attached to me had nothing to do with my past activities.
14. Interrogations often began with serious allegations such as spying. They also brought up less serious charges, such as collaborating with dissident websites. The more serious charge usually served the purpose of intimidating the detainee. In order to avoid the heavier charge, I was willing to accept the less significant one, or enter into some sort of a deal. Later, I realized that the interrogator's objective from the beginning was to get me to admit to the less serious charges. He wanted me to admit to writing articles for websites associated with *Mosharekat*,<sup>2</sup> at the direction of reformists such as Mostafa Tajzadeh. I had attended meetings in my official capacity as a journalist in which Tajzadeh was present, but I had never done so for the purpose of writing articles for *Mosharekat*'s websites. When the interrogator mentioned the spying charges along with the meetings with reformists, it was natural for me to admit to the latter. I truly believed that at the end of the day, they would take me to court and I would simply deny all the allegations I had made in prison.
  15. About ten days after I was arrested, they brought me a piece of paper and asked me to sign it. The date on the paper had already expired. According to Iranian criminal law, prisoners must be arraigned within 48 hours of arrest. Since they had nothing on me, they did not arraign me until ten days after I was arrested. On the tenth day, they charged me with attempts against the national security by way of collaborating with anti-regime and hostile groups bent on weakening the regime.
  16. As I mentioned previously, these charges were based on my own confessions (and those of others). For example, in my articles I had written about my trips, my meetings with foreign dignitaries and my interviews with foreigners who visited Iran. My interrogator accused me of interviewing these individuals in order to elevate their role and status in society. But everything I wrote about was based on the truth. I was a journalist and it was my job to conduct interviews.
  17. Nonetheless, they instructed me to write down, in their words, that after I interviewed these individuals, they would call me and ask that I help them increase their standing inside the country. The interrogators told me to write that my aim was to increase the influence of western culture, and to report on any revolutionary resistance that may stand in the way of this goal. After sustaining hours of beatings and threats, I was forced to admit that this was the plan that I implemented on behalf of the reformists.
  18. The underlying facts were, of course, true. I had interviewed these individuals. But the rest was untrue. After I caved into their demands and wrote that I wished to increase the

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<sup>2</sup> *Mosharekat* is another name for the Islamic Iran Participation Front. This reformist political party was founded in 1998 after the election of President Khatami and was headed by the President's brother, Mohammad-Reza Kathami.



influence of western culture inside the country, things would get even more complicated. They would then request that I admit that the reformists' plans were to transform and eventually destroy Islamic society and culture within ten to fifteen years. The situation ultimately reached ludicrous levels—to the point where I was truly shocked at the nature of the allegations hurled against me!

19. My interrogators' other questions often involved my foreign travels. I told them that I had done nothing out of the ordinary. But they increased the pressure on me and I was eventually forced to admit that the reformists paid for my expenses, and that in return I agreed to help them reach their goals. I apparently "helped" them by accusing the Islamic Republic of failing to provide freedom to women and the youth, alleging that government policies are harmful, and arguing that the regime's authority was illegitimate. After that, I confessed that the reformists, many of whom I had never met, had encouraged me and the others to write false articles (and enticed us with promises of more foreign travel). I did this despite the fact that no reformist actually paid for these trips. It was normal for the publications to pay for my airfare and hotel expenses. One time, I even admitted that during one of these trips the National Youth Organization had offered me \$1,000 so that I would publicize their plans through my writings. (In fact, I had won this merit-based award so that I could attend the World Summit on the Information Society conference in Geneva in 2003).

#### **Lack of Contact with Family**

20. They also threatened to arrest members of my family. For example, they told me that they had confiscated my older brother's computer and found material that could send my brother to prison for ten years. I had no information regarding my brother's computer and had no idea what they were talking about. None of the members of my family were politically involved. My mother did not even know what a weblog is, nor did she know that I posted blogs.
21. After my arrest, my mother spoke to the press. My interrogator threatened to arrest my mother. During the course of interrogations, they ordered me to call my mother and tell her not to speak to anyone. The interrogator monitored the conversation with my mother and told me that if she continued these interviews it would cause trouble for others.
22. During the 35 days I was held at the secret detention facility, I spoke to my mother on the phone twice, but I was never allowed formal family visits. The first time I talked to her was during the first or second week. The second time I spoke to her on the phone was during my last week at the detention facility, and right before my transfer to Evin. They allowed us to talk because my mother was not doing well. We chatted for about two to three minutes.
23. One time, I saw my mother at the Prosecutor's Office. After two weeks, they had blindfolded me and taken me to the Prosecutor's Office. I had a full beard and my mother did not recognize me. When she finally realized it was me, she collapsed. The guard who accompanied me kindly excused himself to the restroom for a couple of minutes so that I could speak to my mother.
24. After my arrest and disappearance, my mother wrote a letter to Mr. Khatami asking him to reveal my whereabouts. In response to my mother, Mr. Khatami apologized and said he did not know anything about my case. I later ran into my mother again at the

Prosecutor's Office. This time, the trial judge allowed me to meet her in his chambers because my mother was not doing well and had been visiting the judge every day asking about my condition. Our visit was very short—it did not last more than five minutes. I do not remember the exact date of this meeting, but I think it happened four or five weeks after my arrest. My mother briefly informed me that the Journalists Union had convened a meeting, and that a prominent journalist (Massoud Behnood) had written an article about our situation. She did this to remind us that we had not been forgotten (despite what we often heard from our interrogator), and that our case was attracting more and more press every day.

### **More Interrogations and Forced Confessions**

25. During my detention at the secret facility, the interrogator often asked terribly inappropriate questions regarding my personal life and the personal lives of others. A series of these questions referenced the forced confessions of other imprisoned journalists. One time, the interrogator showed me another prisoner's confessions. Four out of the five pages of this confession were filled with absolute lies. I realized that this person must have been under a lot of pressure.
26. They wanted me to write about others and asked me questions about my colleagues, friends, individuals I traveled with, and people with whom I was in contact. Based on my previous experiences, I decided it was best to take responsibility for these actions so that others would not be put in danger. This meant that I also accepted responsibility for actions for which others were responsible. But the interrogator wanted me to focus on their personal lives. For example, he wanted me to write that they had illicit sexual relations, that they had taken bribes, and that they had met with opposition members abroad.
27. I told myself that upon my release I could always deny all of these allegations. The interrogator would be forced to produce evidence in court, but I would not be required to prove my innocence by presenting documentation. I comforted myself with the thought that they could carry on with all these fabrications now that I am in detention, but that I would cast doubt on them when I am released.
28. One of the main tactics they used during this time was to focus on my personal relations. They wanted to create a case file regarding sex outside marriage. For example, they asked me to identify a coworker or a female acquaintance with whom I was allegedly intimate. The interrogator alleged that they had videotaped evidence that I had engaged in improper sexual activity at the newspaper office. I rejected this allegation, and noted that it was simply impossible to do such a thing with so many individuals in the office. But he continued on, providing graphic descriptions. He alleged that he had actually seen footage of me unbuttoning my colleague's blouse and placing my hands on her breasts. I did not want to endanger my colleagues, so instead I provided him with several fake names. I knew they were not interested in following up to see whether these people actually existed. All they wanted to prove was that I had engaged in improper sexual relations.
29. One of my interrogator's primary goals was to secure confessions proving that I had engaged in sexual relations with reformist women with whom I had regular contact. But I resisted and did not confess. One time I told him that I had a girlfriend whom I wanted to marry, but that her father did not approve so we did not get married but we remained

- sexually active. This seemed to satisfy him. He told me that I had finally admitted to being a fornicator and that I had to write down the details. He wanted me to discuss the issue from the very beginning, in graphic detail. While he talked, he would run his fingers on my neck and face in a suggestive manner. The more uncomfortable and terrified I became, the more he continued making these inappropriate gestures. Another time he showed me Jennifer Lopez's picture (which he had obtained from my computer) and asked me to identify her. I obliged. Then he asked me whether I had also had sexual relations with her. I had to explain to him that she was an American pop star.
30. After three weeks, the pressure began to overwhelm me. The interrogator wanted us to confess and expose our plans, but none of the scenarios which he wanted us to confess to were true. None of my writings, whether they were posts on my blogs or articles in newspapers, maligned regime officials. I repeatedly asked them to provide evidence that my writings violated the law, but they never produced any documentation.
31. Instead, they presented me with several of my newspaper interviews. They had underlined some of the columns and suggested that my writings could send me to prison for five to ten years. I was familiar with the law and knew they were bluffing. They always threatened me by claiming they had information that could send me to prison for ten years, and that the appeals process before the Supreme Court could take at least two to three years (during which time I would continue to be detained). They were, of course, right about this. Many of those who had been charged with serious crimes spent years in prison before their cases were ever heard by the appellate courts.
32. On the 35<sup>th</sup> day of my detention they put us in a car and took us to the Prosecutor's Office again. Even though I was now on the outside, I knew that I was not free to challenge what I had been forced to confess to while in detention. Instead, I had to ask for mercy and forgiveness. So I admitted to being guilty and asked for forgiveness.
33. Eventually, news of our arrests became big news in Iran, and it was revealed that we were being held in a secret detention facility. Despite their continuous denials that our arrests (Shahram, Roozbeh, Hanif Mazrui and myself) were related, it became obvious that this was not the case (and that we were all being held in the same location).

### **Transfer to Evin, Psychological Torture and our Confession Letters**

34. In late November, after about 35 days, they released 17 individuals linked to the bloggers case files. They transferred the four of us—Roozbeh, Shahram, Javad and me, along with Fereshteh Ghazi and Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh—to Evin prison. They threw us in a ward filled with prisoners who were awaiting conviction or execution (even though they are required to separate political prisoners from the general prison population. I do not know the name of the ward, but it was a strange place. The rest of the prisoners were in solitary confinement, but they placed the four of us in one large room. We could hear people who were screaming as they were being beaten.
35. During the fourth week of our detention, we decided to confess so we could be released. We agreed to accept whatever they wanted from us. We reached the conclusion that we could not really do anything while in prison, and that the more time we spent there the more damage we would do to ourselves. We were concerned that the psychological pressure may be so high that we would sustain permanent emotional damage. It was better for us to cooperate now and challenge their charges after release. Their actions

were clearly illegal—we could talk about our cases upon release and set the record straight.

36. The four of us had one interrogator. We called him “Hajj Aqa,” but his pseudonym was Keshavarz. (This individual was also involved in Sina Motalebi’s case file.) He was fifty-five years old and stocky. One time during questioning he said, “Don’t think I’m uneducated just because you went to college ... I have a master’s in psychology.” Then he threatened me: “I will break you here. We have broken many people who never thought they’d be broken here.” He continued: “I was Kianoori<sup>3</sup> and Abbas Abdi’s<sup>4</sup> interrogator. We smashed Ali Afshari’s<sup>5</sup> head in.”
37. My interrogator was shameless. He subjected me to a lot of pressure, especially in connection with sexual matters. I broke down many times because of this. He used very graphic sexual language during the interrogation process. He often called me “pretty boy.” Sometimes he played with my face, or grabbed my cheeks and ears, or gently brushed my arms and shoulders with his hands. When he did these things, I became extremely worried. I thought he would do something to me. As he did these things he would tell me, in graphic fashion, what he wanted from me. When he explained these things, I often began to cry. I felt horrible. I was in a room alone with a 55 year old man, discussing sexual issues which I could not even discuss with my closest friends.
38. I remember when they were transferring us from the detention facility to Evin, one of the guards said (as he was escorting me to be interrogated): “God willing, they will eventually make a groom out of you.” I asked, “What do you mean?” He answered: “Hajj Aqa will tell you all about it.” I was terrified. These are things they told prisoners prior to raping them. I was ready to die, or do whatever they wanted so they would leave me alone. There is a history of rape in Iran’s prisons, and I did not doubt the fact that they were capable of doing such things. Every individual has a weakness, and I could not handle the thought of someone doing something to me or touching me. The interrogator was well aware of this and used it to his advantage. This is why he conducted the interrogations from 2 a.m. to 4 a.m.
39. At Evin, our interrogators worked feverishly to finalize our confessions. They told us that confessing was our only way out, because they believed that by confessing, we would destroy all our contacts with the reformists. They wanted us to publish our confessions. They summoned us to the interrogation room one by one and developed scenarios for our confessions.
40. As part of my confession, my interrogator asked me to draw a chart showing a network of contacts. Apparently, Shahram was responsible for one part of the network, and Roozbeh and I were responsible for the other parts. Given his familiarity with us, he told me to write that Shahram was responsible for forging ties with writers and artists, that Roozbeh

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<sup>3</sup> Nooredin Kianouri was a high ranking official of the communist Tudeh Party. He was arrested and imprisoned in 1983. He later confessed to spying for the Soviet Union. His confession was broadcast on television.

<sup>4</sup> Abbas Abdi is a prominent reformist who was arrested in 2002 and imprisoned for several years.

<sup>5</sup> Ali Afshari was a student activist and supporter of the reform movement during the late 1990s and 2000s. He was imprisoned from 2000 to 2003.

was responsible for contacting the Religious-Nationalist party,<sup>6</sup> and that I had facilitated ties with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and contacted foreign journalists and civil society activists. Our interrogator was always very interested in hearing about the things that went on inside these NGOs. He was somewhat informed about many of these events, but he wanted to assess the accuracy of his understanding with the information I provided him. I attempted to provide vague and general information, but they always managed to edit and manipulate the information I provided in order to malign the role of NGOs operating inside Iran.

41. The interrogator's number one objective was to gain information, and he was always interested in gaining more of it. For example, he wanted me to reveal the names of ten well-known bloggers who were part of our "network." I knew that if he received this information he would target these bloggers, so I pretended not to know anything. But he kept pressing me. I tried to repeat the same information he had already acquired (or others had provided) and nothing more. I also attempted to list the names of high-ranking reformists as part of the network, exactly as it was described in the *Kayhan* article. For example, I often used Tajzadeh's name during my confessions, because I believed that he was immune from my accusations. His name had already been mentioned in the *Kayhan* article, and it was painfully obvious that he was being set up.
42. In my confessions, they ordered me to focus on the important role of four reformists: Behzad Nabavi, Mostafa Tajzadeh, Mohsen Mirdamadi and Abdollah Ramezanzadeh. I had never even met Mohsen Mirdamadi and Behzad Nabavi in person. I worked for Mirdamadi's newspaper and attended several of his speeches, but I had never met him. But it was not important to them whether or not I had actually seen the man. All they wanted were our confessions. They wanted us to write that we took orders from several reformists—that they sent us to trips abroad and requested that we write articles for them in order to blacken the regime's image. I was forced to confess that we received rewards from reformists in return for favors, and that this was the reason I received a press award in 2002. This was absolutely not true—the Association of Iranian Journalists, which is the body in charge of handing out the award, is an independent NGO and is not controlled by the reformists.
43. Like I said before, different individuals had prominent roles in connection with different parts of this supposed network. Tajzadeh and Nabavi had important roles vis-à-vis the NGOs. Mr. Namazi, Shirin Ebadi, and Haleh Esfandiari were involved with international relations. Many times, the interrogator actually had more accurate and plentiful information about these individuals than I did. For example, I had no idea that Haleh Esfandiari's husband was Shaul Bakhash, and that he was Jewish. But they were well aware of this. In fact, they had lots of information about many things, and often inserted additional details to the text of our confession letters which had nothing to do with my activities.
44. At Evin, the four of us spent most of our time working on our confession letters. They often accused us of refusing to write about an issue, or writing lies and refusing to cooperate. The interrogations were still being conducted by the same interrogator on a daily basis, but they were not terribly lengthy.

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<sup>6</sup> The Religious-Nationalist party is a centrist political party. Several of its members were arrested and imprisoned by the regime in 2000.

45. After we submitted our confession letters they reviewed them. They often returned and asked us to provide more explanation, or supply more names. Sometimes they criticized us for not paying attention to certain instructions they had provided regarding our confessions. For example, my interrogator had told me that I must satisfy ten requirements in my confession letter. Just like a newspaper editor who reviews articles, he instructed me to fix certain portions of my letter or mention the names of particular individuals. When I told him that I did not know these people and did not know what to write, he responded: "You just write it down. It doesn't matter if you actually know them or not. Others know them. It doesn't matter whether or not you know them. They have been involved in these activities regardless." I asked him, "Then why should I write them down?" He responded by beating me and demanding that I stick to writing. So I did.
46. I worked on my confession letter from the fourth week of my detention until I was released. It had turned into a very long letter with different sections, including ones dedicated to NGOs, foreign travel, blogging, meetings with prominent figures, international organizations, etc.
47. When it came to the NGOs, they wanted me to blacken the reputations of several particular individuals. They provided me with certain information which I was to use in my confession letter. They essentially told me what to write about these individuals and the NGOs they were affiliated with. They provided the direction, and slowly gave shape and structure to my writings so they could reach their ultimate objectives.
48. For example, in the international travel section of my confession letter, I had merely written that during my travels I had given speeches about the role of the Internet among youth and discussed strengthening civil society. But they wanted me to use their specific language, and forced me to write that I had traveled at the request of reformists, that they provided me with access to funds, paid for my travel, and ordered me to meet certain individuals during my travels. I was also told to write that during my travels we held secret meetings in which we promised to bring down the regime through use of the Internet.
49. We tried to delay the writing process because we thought they would not beat us as long as we were busy writing. But they got fed up and finally ordered us to finish things up. We realized that someone was putting pressure on them from above. During the second week in Evin, they sat us in front of the camera again so we could practice our confessions. They wanted to prepare us for televised confessions. The four of us never saw each other during these training sessions in front of the camera.
50. We were relieved that the final text of our confession letters would be published while we were in prison, but they had other plans. They wanted to publish them after our release. Our interrogator informed us that we would only be released if we agreed to publish our own confession letters by contacting newspapers and media outlets. He said they would first release one of us. If that person published his confession and everything went as planned, the next person would be released. The second person's release was contingent upon the first person publishing his confession letter. The interrogator warned that if we failed to do this, we would return to prison—there was no way out. He said, "If your confession letters are published while you're in prison, no one would believe them. You have to publish your confessions after your release." Roozbeh was the first one released.

**My Release and Attempts to Publish Our Confession Letters**

51. A few days after Roozbeh's release, the interrogator came to prison and informed us that Roozbeh's confession had been published. The next person could now be released. One week after Roozbeh's release, Shahram and I were freed. They gave us several copies of our confessions. My mother and father were waiting for me outside prison.
52. Two days after our release, I went to several different media outlets so I could publish Shahram's and my confession letters. (Because Shahram's family lived outside Tehran, I took on the responsibility of getting his letter published.) The confession letters were written with beautiful handwriting. But many of the outlets were familiar with us and refused to publish our letters. Even government outlets like the Iranian Students News Agency were skeptical—they actually required us to come back accompanied by a lawyer.
53. After several attempts, I went to the *Fars News Agency*. They were expecting us and already had a copy of our confession. Meanwhile, Saeed Mortazavi, Tehran's Chief Prosecutor, had called the outlets which had initially refused to publish our letters and ordered them to allow publication. They obliged. Employees from dailies such as *Iran*, *Shargh*, and *Etemad* (who were our friends) called us and apologized. They said: "We're sorry, but we have been ordered to publish your confession letters. Mr. Mortazavi called our editors-in-chief and ordered that your letters be published on the first or second page of our papers."
54. Four or five days after the publication of our confessions, we were contacted by the President's representatives, who requested that we discuss our 40-day ordeal in detention before the President's *ad hoc* Constitutional Watch Committee. I told him that I would not meet with him because he could not guarantee our safety. If we had decided to speak, our lives could be in danger.

**Our Encounters with Saeed Mortazavi**

55. Apparently, news of the Committee's invitation had also reached the Tehran Chief Prosecutor's Office. My interrogator called me and said I had done well with the confession letters, and that "the authorities" were happy. He was referring to Mortazavi. Then he requested that we see Mortazavi. Shahram was out of town, so Roozbeh and I went to see him. We met with Mortazavi and the interrogator. The interrogator asked us to affirm our confessions. Then he asked us to go to the *Majlis*' Article 90 Commission and lodge complaints against the reformists whom we had named in our confession letters. They also wanted us to write a letter condemning the actions of the Journalist Union of Iran (which had, among other things, conducted a sit-in in response to our arrests). We wrote the letter and showed it to Mortazavi. He quickly read over it and told us that we were better writers than this. He wanted us to conform to his requirements.
56. We met with Mortazavi two or three more times. The first time was because there were "rumors" circulating that we had been held at a secret detention facility. Mortazavi wanted to make sure that we were not responsible for leaking such information. He threatened us and warned that if we leaked certain information, our lives would be in danger.

57. The second time, our interrogator called and told us that Mr. Mortazavi wanted to see us. About five or six days after our release, Roozbeh, Shahram and I went to court and met with Mortazavi. Mortazavi is a very manipulative and cunning individual. He told us to tell the truth. Then he requested that we repeat our confessions, and that we do it in front of the television cameras because it was more believable (since we were now free and people would not object to our confessions being made under pressure). I objected and insisted that this was not a good idea, and that people would not believe us. Mortazavi disagreed and ordered us to give televised interviews.
58. Right around then, we realized that the press had already been invited and were waiting for us outside. Mortazavi said, "This is the last thing you have to do. You have to give the interviews. Do not play with your lives." He added, "You should have received heavy punishment for the things you have done. If you do not do this one thing you will receive even harsher punishment and will spend a lot of time in prison." He closed with: "Don't be heroes. We could do whatever we want. In this country, many people die in car accidents. It's not only journalists who die in car accidents. Merchants, *Majlis* representatives, butchers—all of them die in traffic accidents." We could not believe the words coming out of his mouth. Finally, Mortazavi provided us with the parameters for our interview. and told each of us what to talk about during the interviews. During my television interview I refused to mention any names. But the *Fars News Agency* and *Kayhan* later quoted portions of my confession letters from prison as if the statements had been made during my televised interview.
59. When we exited Mortazavi's office, television journalists approached us and asked us questions. We answered them. Javad Gholam Tamimi (a journalist whose case was different than ours) had also joined us from prison. During the course of the television interview, I cried a lot. I told my interrogator that this was the end of the line for me—I could not agree to anything else after this. This was the last thing I would do for them. I told them that if they pushed me a little harder I would turn on them. After the public interview, several of the government channels conducted their own exclusive interviews. It was all quite a shameless sham—some of the reporters interviewed our interrogator as if they had been childhood friends for years. I declined to give interviews because I was in real bad shape. After the public interview, the interrogator called and asked why I had cried so much. I said that I felt horrible. That same night, around 8 p.m., our interviews were broadcast for the first time.
60. The third time, Mortazavi ordered us to publish our confession letters in a book. I think it was around 12 days after our release. On that day, he secured a signature from Roozbeh agreeing to publish his confession in a book. But after the television interviews, Roozbeh and I decided to no longer submit to the interrogator's demands. The three of us, Shahram, Roozbeh and I, convened regular meetings to see how we could resist Mortazavi's pressure. After one of our meetings, Roozbeh informed *Kayhan* that if they decided to publish his confessions, he would expose the truth about our detention. Our tactic seemed to work and they stopped discussing the issue of publishing our confession letters in book form.
61. After the three meetings I had with Mortazavi, we realized that he was the main person responsible for our confessions. He was the one who told us what to say and what not to say. I believe that Mortazavi was directly involved in our arrests. Without his order, we would not have been arrested. He was the Prosecutor, and he was aware that we were being detained in an unlawful detention facility. I am certain that he personally



supervised our detention and was informed about our interrogations. He was responsible for securing confessions from us, and I am sure that he reviewed every copy of our confession letters. He also played an important role in our torture and psychological abuse by directly threatening us in case we decided not to cooperate.

### **Our Meeting with the Constitutional Watch Committee**

62. After the television confessions were broadcast, the Constitutional Watch Committee called us and requested that we meet President Khatami in his office. News of the Committee's invitation had been previously reported in several newspapers. That same day, Mortazavi's office called and ordered us to meet him. We expected him to tell us not to go to the President's office, so Roozbeh and I decided not to return his phone call. We turned our phones off and went to the Constitutional Watch Committee. Shahram was on vacation at the time. We had decided it was best if Shahram did not participate in the meeting because he had three little children.
63. When we arrived, Abtahi informed us that we should not feel compelled to talk because they could not guarantee our safety after we left. They were powerless if anything were to happen to us. He told us the decision was ours. But Roozbeh and I said that we had things we wanted to talk about, and we agreed to go forth with the meeting.
64. Approximately a week after our televised interviews we met the Constitutional Watch Committee. We informed them, in detail, about everything that happened to us in prison. During the course of the meeting, the head of the Committee asked us to discuss the types of pressure we faced. I explained this to them in graphic detail. During my explanation, I noticed that half of the Committee members were in tears. They reported the meeting's results to Khatami. After reading the report, the Committee concluded: "Even if ten percent of what they are saying is true, our nation is in trouble! This issue must be further investigated." The same evening Abtahi spoke to Khatami about the meeting.

### **Our Meeting with Ayatollah Shahroudi**

65. Exactly two days after this meeting, we were contacted by the office of the deputy head of the Judiciary. We spoke to Shahroudi's deputy. We visited the Judiciary. This time I, Roozbeh, Shahram, Hanif Mazrui, Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh and several others attended the meeting. We talked about our detention and interrogation with him. When he heard our stories, he advised us to approach Mr. Shahroudi and promised to arrange a meeting with him. The next day, a meeting was arranged with Mr. Shahroudi and we went to visit him.
66. When Mr. Shahroudi heard our stories, he became extremely angry. He said that serious violations had taken place in connection with our cases and demanded that the perpetrators be punished. Shahroudi promised that he would take our cases away from Mortazavi and transfer them to a special three-member committee. Jamal Karimi-Rad, the Judiciary's spokesman, was instructed to investigate our cases. But Karimi-Rad was later killed in a car accident and our cases were eventually returned to Mortazavi. Last year, I was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison.

## Arash Sigarchi

Arash Sigarchi is a journalist and blogger.

Sigarchi began his journalism career working as a sports reporter for *Gam*. By the age of 20, he was a movie critic for a prominent newspaper in Tehran, *Hamshahri*. When the reform movement began in Iran in late 1990s, Sigarchi began writing political articles for many of Iran's well-known reformist papers. In the spring of 2001, after the closure of dozens of newspapers, Sigarchi returned to his hometown of Rasht and co-founded a local newspaper. He initially worked as a political reporter, but later assumed management responsibilities. That same year, Sigarchi also began writing his own blog. His book of poetry, entitled *Drunken Exaggerations*, has been published in Iran, but several of his other works never received permission for publication.



Sigarchi was arrested in December 2004 and sentenced to 14 years for his allegedly illegal cyber-journalist and blogging activities. He was released on bail in March 2005. In December 2005, an appeals court reduced his sentence to three years' imprisonment. While in prison, Sigarchi developed cancer of the tongue. He spent the next several months in and out of prison. On January 10, 2008, he left Iran for treatment and has not returned. His cancer is currently in remission.

Sigarchi has received many awards throughout his professional career. In 2001 and 2002, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance of the Islamic Republic acknowledged his contribution to the field of journalism. In 2006, Sigarchi received Human Rights Watch's Hellman/Hammett award for his courage and dedication in the field of journalism.

Sigarchi currently resides in the United States and works as a reporter with Voice of America (Persian Service).



### Witness Statement of Arash Sigarchi

**Name:** Arash Sigarchi

**Place of Birth:** Rasht, Iran

**Date of Birth:** October 26, 1978

**Occupation:** Journalist and Former Editor-in-Chief of *Gilan-i Emrooz*

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**Interviewing Organization:** Iran Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC)

**Date of Interview:** October 23, 2008

**Interviewer:** IHRDC Staff

**Witnesses:**

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This statement was prepared pursuant to an in-person interview with Mr. Arash Sigarchi. The statement consists of 54 paragraphs and 14 pages. The interview was conducted on October 23, 2008. The statement was approved by Mr. Sigarchi on January 11, 2009.

## Witness Statement

1. My name is Arash Sigarchi. I was born on October 26 1978, in the city of Rasht, Gilan province. I was a journalist and the Editor-in-Chief of a newspaper in Gilan, called *Gilan-i Imruz*. I was responsible for monitoring the quality of the news and articles that we published. Naturally, censorship exists in Iran, but in 2000, a new trend was introduced where the regime<sup>1</sup> shut down a lot of newspapers and weekly journals. This became very costly for the government; if you can imagine, they would shut down 40 newspapers in one day. So they had to come up with a solution to cut costs. They resolved to tame the journalist in hopes of controlling the content of newspapers, and preventing them from writing about “dangerous” topics. Ultimately, such policies prevented journalists from writing freely.

### Press Censorship and the “Red Line”

2. Only two newspapers were courageous, *Hayat-i Naw* and *Bahar*, which the regime had already shut down. Some newspapers were not closed in that period and survived the mass closure of 40 newspapers. However, they were finally all closed. The reason I say “courageous” is that after May 1997, with the opening of *Jami’i* Newspaper, a new form of press was created that did not fear retaliation by the government and provided information defiantly. In fact, I would go a step further and say that it was such newspapers that removed the fear of imprisonment, torture, etc. from the heart of journalists. I myself feared retaliation by the regime but after seeing the example of Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, who always had a bag ready to take with him to prison, my fears disappeared.
3. Back to *Hayat-i Naw* and *Bahar*—these two papers survived the closure of April 24, 2000, making them the only newspapers left. Not long had passed when on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July of the same year, an amendment to the press law was discussed in the *Majlis* and the leader issued a verdict. *Bahar* reported the opposing views of some of the *Majlis* representatives and was shut down the next day. This was after *Bahar* had managed to stay open for two months after the mass closures. *Hayat-i Naw* did not fare much better. Although the paper was owned by the [Supreme] Leader’s younger brother, Hadi Khamenei, it was closed after a year. It is noteworthy that the Leader’s younger brother belonged to the reformist group.
4. Under such conditions, I was the Editor-in-Chief of a regional newspaper. It was a quality newspaper with high circulation. However, I received word from Tehran through circulars from the National Security Council instructing me not to publish certain news. For example, if the teachers demonstrated, we were told we shouldn’t publish anything about it. Or if the laborers demonstrated we were told we shouldn’t write about it.
5. Towards the end of March 2002, I started blogging. Blogging has a particular definition; it is like the journal you keep when you are a teenager. When I was young, I had a journal like this and I knew how to write. Every day in my blog, I would write my daily memoir if it were important.

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<sup>1</sup> Here “regime” refers to the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Based on a discourse prevalent among officials of the IRI, this term is used instead of the term “government.” This is due to the complex government structure of Iran. Generally, in most countries, when one says “government” they mean the entire governing body of that country. But in Iran, “government” refers to one of the three branches of power, the executive, legislative and judicial, which function under the supervision of the Supreme Leader. Hence when you talk about Iran, you can’t say the “government” of Iran because that is part of a whole, while the term “regime” refers to the Supreme Leader and the three branches of power beneath him.

6. On November 29, 2002, a series of telephone poles were installed in Rasht. In appearance, they were cell phone towers, but in reality they served to interrupt the reception of satellites, so people couldn't watch satellite TV. One of those poles was placed in front of a girls' school, which could affect the fertility of the girls. I did some research on this issue and prepared a controversial report that was to be published by our newspaper. The night before distribution, the general manager removed the story and said if it was published we would be shut down. I retorted that reporting on the news was a worthwhile cause to be shut down for. When I couldn't run the report, I put the article on my weblog that evening to spite the general manager of the newspaper. Immediately, other news agencies picked up the report. Other cities began to realize the same thing was being done in their area, and understood what the real situation was. From that point on, whenever my general manager disagreed with me, I resisted fighting him on it—I would just put the article on my blog.
7. In 2004, during the same time that tensions were high at the office, the student movement was galvanizing and their activities were increasing. Rasht is a city where student and political movements always start, and an important gathering took place there—so I began to cover the student movement. When this happened, I reported the news pertaining to the student movement constantly. News agencies, such as *RadioFarda*, *Radio Français* and *BBC News*, contacted me saying that they wanted me to give testimony of the situation as a journalist. Due to my duty as a journalist, I did exactly that. I remember at the time, NI-TV reported that in Rasht 10,000 people were demonstrating. As a witness to the event, I clarified that there were only 2,000 people there, 500 of which were intelligence agents and law enforcement officers. What I mean to say is that, as a journalist, my reports were accurate and realistic.

### **Encounter with the Ministry of Intelligence**

8. But the Ministry of Intelligence didn't understand this. They called and informed me that I was not permitted to give interviews. I responded that since there were no laws banning me from giving interviews, I would continue to do so. Two weeks later, I received a communiqué from the National Security Council, which had previously been sent to newspapers in Tehran, stating that I was not permitted to give interviews. The Intelligence officers only showed me the communiqué, which was a letter that had the words "Confidential/Secret" on the top of the page. In the communiqué, it was emphasized that all of the country's officials, including representatives, commanders, regional officers, chief directors and their subordinates were banned from giving interviews to "hostile" media outlets, such as *Radio Israel*, *Radio Freedom*, *RFE/RL*, *Radio America*, *Radio Français*, *Radio Germany*, etc. Of course, this circular had other provisions. Although the circular said nothing about newspaper journalists, my interrogator said that I was subject to its content. The interrogator further added, "The regime trusts you and has kept you as a journalist. If you were not trusted, you would have been eliminated [as a journalist]."
9. He was right, because a few months later, as he put it, they "eliminated" me. What's interesting is that *BBC News* was not among the listed news agencies that I was not permitted to talk to. *Radio America*, *Radio Israel*, *RadioFarda*, *Radio Français*, and a few Swedish radios were on the list. I specifically asked the interrogator about doing interviews with *BBC News* and he did not give a clear answer, at which point I assumed I was allowed to do so. So I only did interviews with *BBC News*. In addition, I made a new arrangement with my old colleague who now worked at *RadioFarda*. We decided that I would give interviews to *RadioFarda* using a pseudonym and distorting my voice. I picked the pseudonym Kambiz Karimi.

10. Throughout the summer of 2003, I continued to cover the news on my blog using my own name. In 2004, due to increased pressure from the Ministry of Intelligence, I began engaging in more and more self-censorship. I repeatedly saw cars following me with passengers who were clearly from the parallel intelligence agencies. While I attempted to spread freedom of speech, I was also very anxious because I didn't work in Tehran. Working outside of Tehran is much more dangerous. With this in mind, I conceded to engage in marginal self-censorship. In my opinion, I was addressing the issues and balancing them out. When political issues were being censored due to added pressure, I would write boldly about non-political issues. For example, in one story we pursued a serious cultural critique of provincial officials. We would critique and challenge the officials on issues pertaining to social and recreational activities. I remember I was working on AIDS statistics that were confidential at the time. I went to the deputy minister in charge of this issue and published controversial articles. This was the first time a newspaper had announced that there were 7,000 patients infected with AIDS, over whom the government had no supervision. The topic stirred so much controversy that the Ministry of Intelligence summoned me. They reprimanded me and asked why I liked to stir up trouble. I responded, "You told me not to criticize the Leader, not to criticize Rafsanjani. If I don't write about AIDS, then I might as well report on the fluctuating price of tomatoes." I was very outspoken during this time. In general, we were somewhat cautious in preparing reports and articles, which would only be explained as self-censorship. For example, there was a news story about the *Imam Jum'ih* of a city wasting millions of *tomans*. To avoid being shut down, we covered the issue without pointing directly to that person, writing a vague title such as "Wasting of money by officials." In this manner, we would draw attention to the news and avoid being shut down by the government.
11. Two circumstances led to my coming to blows with the government. On August 26, 2004, I decided to write on the controversial topic of the 1988 massacre in Iran. I had adequate information about a specific person from Gilan, who was the deputy of Massoud Rajavi, leader of the *Mojahedin-e Khalq*, and I wrote an article about him.

### **My First Arrest**

12. The second situation was an event that occurred beyond my control. I did only one interview with *RadioFarda* under my real name and that was about the student demonstration in Rasht. The rest of my interviews were done using my pseudonym. On August 27, 2004, which was a Friday, I did an interview with *RadioFarda* as "Kambiz Karimi" regarding the laborer's demonstration. At the time, *RadioFarda* broadcast from Prague until midnight Tehran time, which was 4 p.m. EST. After 4 p.m. EST, it broadcast from Washington D.C. *RadioFarda* employees made some sort of mistake, because at midnight when the news was rebroadcasting from D.C., it was announced that an interview with Kambiz Karimi regarding the laborer's demonstration in Rasht was to air. But they mistakenly broadcasted my old interview regarding the student movement in 2003, using my real name. I think the Ministry of Intelligence compared these two interviews together, and used high-tech equipment to decipher the distorted voice, and concluded that "Kambiz Karimi" is the same person as Arash Sigarchi.
13. That Thursday, I put the 1988 massacre article on my blog. On Saturday, August 28, 2004, at 11:30 a.m., I was in the provincial office when someone called me and told me to "bring [my] lazy ass" to the Intelligence prison. It was clear to me from his tone of voice what kind of situation I was walking into. Of course, at this point I didn't know about the *RadioFarda* broadcast and thought the summons was about the article I had put up on my blog. I immediately called a few of my friends with whom I had discussed the possibility of getting

arrested, and informed them of the situation. My mother then called me to see what was happening. I told her that I had been called and summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence prison. She sounded nervous and informed me that some officers had been at our house. I told her I would return home as soon as I coordinated with Mohammad Kazim Shokouhi-Rad, the general manager of the paper, so that he could prepare bail and provide my legal defense.

14. Apparently, while I had been at the provincial office that morning, four officers from the Ministry of Intelligence and a fifth, who was a judge, raided our house and turned it inside out. They took everything with them, including my writings, computers and books. I didn't know their names, as they didn't introduce themselves, but they showed my mother a warrant, which was all legal and by the book.
15. At 12:30 p.m., I went to the prison. It was a small prison at the center of the city with a few wards. It was more of a detention center than a prison. It didn't have the intricacies of a prison. For instance, upon entry to a prison, a prisoner is usually registered, photographed and fingerprinted. There are also different sections inside a prison. But this Intelligence detention center was not like that. It was a short hallway with cells on either side. It was the same place where they held our monthly interrogations, or "Q and A's."
16. As I said before, the Ministry of Intelligence had a project to control and limit the ability of professional journalists to report the news. In order to do this, they would summon professional journalists once a month, or sometimes once a week, to an office called *Sitad-i Khabariyih Vizarat-i Ittila't* [News Agency of the Ministry of Intelligence]. This agency, which has an office in each province, acts as a public affairs office and was established so the general public can raise concerns over matters pertaining to the Ministry of Intelligence. In reality, though, no one wants anything to do with this office; people are usually summoned there. Throughout the three years I was the Editor-in-Chief of the paper, I was summoned there over fifteen times, about once every 30 to 40 days. The first time I received a phone call from the agency summoning me, I refused to go and demanded to be sent a written summons. They then sent two officers who told me that if I didn't leave on my own volition, they would throw me into a sack and take me. From that point on, each time I was called to go I obliged. They wouldn't say it was an interrogation, but they kept a written record of all of the conversations and sent the record to their superiors. They would serve refreshments to keep it friendly. They insisted that it was a consultation, although I had nothing to share with them since "befriending" an Intelligence officer is poison to a journalist's career.

### **Interrogations and Beatings**

17. Abdul-Hossein Samadi was the officer in charge of my case file. He summoned me to the Intelligence office, usually once a month, and was in charge of giving me "guidance." He was a short, young man. After six or seven months and a few months before I was detained, I felt that these meetings were becoming more of a collaboration. For example, my newspaper published an article that was about a government director embezzling funds. Mr. Samadi, my interrogator, called me and complained that I hadn't coordinated my activities with him. I told him I wasn't aware that I was supposed to coordinate with him. He responded that we are comrades, and I made it clear that we were not. From that point forward, there was some tension between us, which became more evident when he called me a few weeks later. He said, "Even in America the CIA and *Newsweek* journalists collaborate and give news to each other." I disagreed, replying that there hadn't in fact been any collaboration because I gave information but I didn't get anything in return. I also noted that the CIA doesn't ask personal questions, such as whether my friends or I have satellites in our houses, or if we drink. After

this, we had limited communication and our relationship soured. I was aware that Mr. Samadi was economically helping the other journalists who were being cooperative. However, after my interview with *RadioFarda*, he made it a point to remind me that he intended to help me like he did for others, but that I clearly did not want his help. I told him that everyone had to choose their own path and that I had chosen mine.

18. It was late August and extremely hot when I was summoned to the detention center. Nonetheless, I was made to stand outside under the sun for two hours. It was around 2:00 or 2:30 p.m. when two soldiers took me inside the detention center and placed me in a cell, leaving me there for another 2 hours. It was a really small cell, about 1½ meters by 2 meters, which I later realized was a palace compared to the cells I would eventually be placed in. They called me around 4:00 or 5:00 p.m., blindfolded me, and took me to a basement. They slapped me around for about two hours and broke my glasses and watch. They splashed me with water and hit me some more—enough to make me cry. The beatings weren't anything like what I had heard about before. They went on for three to four hours. I think it was around 10:00 or 11:00 p.m. when a few people arrived, but I wasn't able to see them. One of them said, "Is this him? He will be dealt with! We'll make him talk, he has to say what the hell he's been up to." You could tell by his accent that he was from Tehran. While they were talking among themselves, I recognized Samadi's voice and asked if he was in the room. From behind, I heard them say, "Who is Samadi ... who the hell is he? How much were you paid for spying?" I gave them straightforward answers. Their questions were irrelevant and unacceptable. They had no expertise in the field of journalism and insisted that I had spied. I emphasized that I was only a journalist. They asked me why I had contacts with foreign radio stations. I replied because I was a journalist and my job was to report the news. Eventually, they left and returned me to my cell.
19. It was perhaps 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. when they took me out of my cell and blindfolded me again. I heard Samadi's voice, and I asked him to identify himself. This time he responded with a "Yes." He began to interrogate me. At this point, I had gathered what was going on. Up to this point, I had thought that I was being detained for the piece I had written on Friday. I wondered why I had been detained so soon after its posting because there was usually some lag time between blog entries and interrogations. In this instance, however, when I heard the questions I realized that the problem wasn't just about my recent blog entry but about other important matters such as my collaboration with *RadioFarda*.
20. They removed my blindfold and I realized that I was facing the wall and that Samadi was behind me. I turned my chair around and we started talking. The questions revolved around *RadioFarda* and he never raised any issues about my blog. He accused me of having taken trips to Sanandaj and other places for the purpose of spying. He added that I had received some sort of training. I was interrogated until the rooster crowed and the sun came out. I think the interrogation lasted about six to seven hours. Before they returned me to my cell, I complained that they had beaten me and mistreated me. Samadi responded that the beatings were a mistake, and that they had confused me with someone else.
21. Samadi tried to befriend me after that. They changed my cell to one that had an air conditioner and a bed. I slept. Around noon they called me again. I changed my clothes and I found that they had prepared rice and kabob. At the time, I used to say my daily prayers and I requested permission to say my prayers first. They obliged. In fact, the officer in charge of my case came and prayed next to me. After lunch they continued to interrogate me but the vibe of the interrogation completely changed and became friendlier. Samadi wrote his questions and I replied in writing. He told me that he wanted to help me. He asked a few



questions about the political affiliation of my family and told me that they knew that my uncle was a *Mojahed*, to which I replied, “Oh, so that’s the problem?! So the *RadioFarda* issue is just to confuse me!”

22. On the second day of interrogation, at 5:00 p.m., Samadi said, “Technically we should keep you in prison, but if you cooperate with us we’ll help you.” I did not reply to him. They took me with a white *Paykan* to my home and dropped me off. I got home around 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. When I was about to get out, the interrogator asked, “What are you going to do with the mess that you’ve made of leaking information?” This was regarding the fact that I had informed my friends that I was going to be detained, and that news of my detention had spread fast. During my interrogations, they asked me why I had leaked information regarding my detention. I responded by invoking Zahra Kazemi’s name, and telling them that given conditions in the country it was natural for me to be wary after being summoned. They didn’t see it my way, and suggested that I write something on my blog to defuse the situation. So I wrote something that basically said that I had been unwell for a few days and had gone to the seaside. Later, when I was freed and came to America, I kept the posting but made changes to it by striking through the previous text and noting that I had written the entry at the “suggestion” of my interrogator, and after two days of torture. The day after or the day of my release was the Birth of Imam Ali/Father’s day. I was arrested on August 28, 2004, and released the evening of the next day, August 29, 2004.

### **The Period Between Arrests**

23. They didn’t call me again until December 9, 2004. Nothing significant happened during this time. I went to the newspaper every day and tried to perform my daily tasks.
24. Naturally, after my two days of detention and before my next arrest, they monitored my weblog more closely. Of course, they had been monitoring my weblog since I first started it. However, I had thought to myself that under these conditions, they would read every posting on my weblog in the worst light possible. Generally when someone is detained for a few days and then released, it is done with the intention of scaring him. If he were dangerous, they wouldn’t release him at all. Realizing this, I tried to write more cautiously. My self-censorship intensified. The problem was clearly serious now. Prior to this, every time they didn’t like a certain entry, they would contact me by phone. However, this time they had tortured me and raided my house. It was natural for me to be afraid. Moreover, I didn’t want the paper to be shut down because of my actions.
25. Although I had certain journalistic standards, I could not resist the pressure the government was putting on me. Given the choice of having them censor my writing or not writing at all, I chose the latter. Prior to this point, I would have an op-ed published in almost every issue of the newspaper. But after those two days of detention I generally didn’t write, and if I wrote a piece, I would not put my name on it. Whereas before I would write ten pieces a month, I only wrote five during the next three months. And I would severely restrict the subject matter which I wrote about.
26. I know I was being monitored before I was arrested in August 2004, and that my office and home phones were being tapped. The truth is, not only did they tap my phone, but they had people spying on me as well. Going back and forth from the Intelligence office, I realized that *Sitad-i Khabari* had a wide network for receiving intelligence. Namely, they would use kiosk owners, taxi drivers, traveling salesmen, and even prostitutes to receive daily information. There were a few incidents that assured me that I was being spied on by people close to me. I

had a colleague whom I won't name that I believe spied on the newspaper to the Intelligence Ministry. I used to go visit Amir-Entezam, a jailed political dissident in Tehran, a lot. Once, when I returned from a business trip from Tehran, I saw this fellow and told him that Amir-Entezam insisted that I marry his 21-year-old daughter. In fact, Amir-Entezam didn't have a daughter that age. The following Thursday when I went to the *Sitad-i Khabari* for a Q and A session, Mr. Samadi commented on my getting married. I joked back that my girlfriend still refused to marry me. He clarified that he was referring to my impending marriage to Amir-Entezam's daughter. I denied it and then casually noted that I was going to fire this colleague of mine that I suspected was spying on me. Mr. Samadi showed concern and asked why. I told him that he was the one who informed Samadi about Amir-Entezam's daughter, which I had not shared with anyone else. He told me I was mistaken about this gentleman and confessed that they had many Intelligence sources. Then I informed him that I had made the whole thing up to test this fellow. Ultimately, I never fired the guy, but he replaced me as Editor-in-Chief once I left the newspaper. Another time, I was drunk at a party with several close friends and in jest I used a broom as a guitar and pretended to play and sing. The following week during my weekly interrogations, the interrogator told me that it was not dignified for the Editor-in-Chief of a newspaper to hold a broom and dance. It was obvious that they had very detailed information about me.

### **My Second Arrest and Trial**

27. I was summoned again in December 9, 2004, to *Sitad-i Khabari*. Two days earlier, they had called and suggested that since it was a long weekend I should find some time to go to the *Sitad-i Khabari*. So, on Thursday, December 9, 2004, at 10 a.m., I went there. Samadi and another man were waiting. They only asked me about the *Mojahedin*. Samadi asked about my relationship with the *Mujahidin-e Khalq*, and suggested that I had given away information about Iran's nuclear projects. He also insisted that I had received money from the *Mojahedin*. I think their strategy was to get confessions from me the same way they did from other bloggers. Prior to this, webbloggers were placed under pressure and tortured, and were made to eventually confess that they had received money from foreign countries. Their confessions were even televised. My interrogators had aimed to receive a similar type of confession from me; that I had received money from foreign countries. Mr. Samadi, who had attempted to gain my friendship and who said he wanted to "help me," refused to help this time. He told me that, unlike the promise of assistance he'd offered before, there is nothing he could do for me now because I had chosen not to cooperate with him. But I had reasons for not cooperating.
28. On January 6, 2005, the newspaper's general manager called me to the office yard, which he often did when he wished to discuss private matters. He was working with the blessing of the regime and was therefore on good terms with them. He told me that I had to go to court the next day. I said, "So, it's finally serious?" He told me that he tried his best to avoid a court summons, but was unsuccessful. He assured me, however, that it was nothing serious, and that he had a deed for bail. That evening I went to the newspaper and spoke to my colleagues and distributed my remaining responsibilities. The next morning at 9:00 a.m., I appeared in court. From 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., Officer Samadi, the investigator in my case, was in the judge's chamber while I waited outside. During this time, a few other people went in and out of the judge's office. One of them was the Chief Judge of the city of Rasht. The others were intelligence officials who went in to talk to the judge for a few minutes. The judge assigned to my case was Judge Eskandari, who was the Head of Branch 3 of the Islamic Revolutionary Court of Gilan province.
29. Judge Eskandari was very-clean cut and well-dressed. He was an interesting character, who was rumored to have sexual relations with other men. While I was in prison, I heard from one of the inmates that he had been propositioned by Eskandari, which at the time I did not

believe. But when I was released, my parents and everyone else were saying the same thing. The truth was that Judge Eskandari had two problems to deal with. The first was that he was a homosexual and the other was that he used his position to acquire wealth. For example, if a person was arrested with a thousand kilograms of heroin that was worth say, \$500,000, Eskandari would suggest that in exchange for \$100,000, he would issue him a sentence of ten years (the punishment for such crime, in fact, was three executions). Another example is that while I was in the public ward, there was a man who was given a two-year sentence for the possession of one kilogram of opium, while another man had received the same sentence for possession of 100 grams of opium. Eskandari would also share these monetary gains with other judges and intelligence officials.

30. At 12 p.m., the judge finally called me in to a small room where he was sitting behind a table and officer Samadi was sitting behind another table. As I came forward, he asked if I was Sigarchi, after which he began speaking to me in French. He went on for 10 minutes in French and then said “Don’t you understand what I’m saying?” I said, “No.” He then suggested we speak in English, and went on in English for a while. I understood a bit and responded to what I could. After having waited four hours, though, I felt justified in complaining to him. So I sarcastically asked if they had summoned me to court for foreign language lessons. He scolded me: “Shut up you piece of trash! What kind of spy are you that doesn’t know any other languages?” He then gave my case file to the guard and told me to get lost.
31. After another two hours, they called me back in again. They presented me with a few articles that my newspaper had published and accused me of having written lies. I replied that if they wanted the documents to corroborate the stories I had written, I would provide them. But Judge Eskandari insisted they were lies. Whenever I argued with him, he would send me out of the room and then call me back in again. This went on a few times. After a while, I suggested that if the crimes they were accusing me of were press violations, I should be entitled to legal representation and a jury according to the law. I added that I have nothing left to say. He snapped, and ordered one of the guards to handcuff me. They handcuffed me and took me to the ward and left me there for another hour or so. At 3 p.m., Mr. Eskandari called me back and told me to return the next day at 9:00 a.m.
32. I went straight back to the *Gilan-i Imruz* office. My colleagues were very worried about me. I delegated the remainder of my work and told them that “the road on which I was about to tread had no return.” They insisted that I should apologize and repent. I told them that the judge I was dealing with was unpredictable and there was no point in trying to apologize or repent. That evening, some of my friends came over and said they would help me escape the country. We weren’t that far from the border—about three hours. Although they wanted to help me escape, I felt I hadn’t done anything wrong, so I didn’t go. Later that night, another set of friends called and told me that my case was very serious and the Ministry of Intelligence would really harass me. I acknowledged their concern, and told them that the end of the road is execution. I was once again thinking of what had been done to Zahra Kazemi. But I didn’t try to leave; I stayed home that night. Of course, even if I had wanted to leave, they wouldn’t have let me. I’m sure I was being monitored.

### **My Charges**

33. In the morning, I went back to the court groomed and well-dressed. The court proceedings began. My charges were read one by one. I can’t remember what they all were because I never received them in writing. I was charged with 14 different crimes but ultimately was convicted of four. I remember that one was that I had insulted the Leader (*Rahbar*). They said that I had written in my blog that “Mr. Khamenei is going to drink the cup of poison just like

Imam Khomeini drank the cup of poison. And just like Imam Khomeini died a year after that, Khamenei will also die a year later.” I corrected them and said, “I wrote in my blog and recommended to Mr. Khamenei that since the world has threatened Iran and war is looming, it is best to drink the cup of poison before it is too late.” But I never wrote “Just like Khomeini died a year after that, Khamenei will also die a year later.” He insisted that I had written what he said. I responded that if they had the documents to prove their position, I would willingly go to prison. He replied that they also had “other” charges against me.

34. The interrogator pointed out other arbitrary issues. For example, he raised an issue about an article published in my paper. My general manager had decided to allow a third party, who was very *Hezbollahi* [conservative], to put together the entire issue every Saturday. The Saturday before the Leader came to Rasht, the group placed an article on the front page titled “Countdown [*shumarish-i ma'kus*] to Leader’s Arrival.” The interrogator said the second issue of insulting the Supreme Leader was using, as he put it “the accursed term countdown [*shumarish-i ma'kus*],” rather than “reverse counting [*shumarish-i varunih*].” In fact, I had nothing to do with that issue of the paper and had no part in writing the article at all.
35. My other charge was publishing lies. What was “publishing lies?” The interrogator said, “You wrote lies in the news about Babak Mehdizadeh.” Babak Mehdizadeh was the paper’s political reporter. He was summoned to the Intelligence Ministry and interrogated. I wrote about this in my blog. The interrogator argued that Mehdizadeh had not actually been summoned, and that I was spreading lies. I responded that I had a letter from Babak himself saying that he had been summoned, and that if it were not true, then he was the liar. I just reported the news based on his letter. The interrogator also raised the issue of another journalist, Farshad Ghorbanpour, who was the paper’s economic reporter and had been detained. He accused me of lying when I reported that Farshad had been imprisoned. Again, I replied that, as a matter of fact, Farshad had been detained by *Sepah* for a week. He retorted that Farshad had been “detained” and not “imprisoned.”
36. He also told me that I insulted Imam Khomeini. Now, what did “insulting the Imam” mean? The interrogator said that I had written an article suggesting that Khomeini was a dictator. I said that I had never written such a thing, that I was a journalist who knew the boundaries in Iran very well. If I were to write such a thing, I would leave myself vulnerable to their attacks.
37. When they confiscated the newspaper’s computers they found a series of Photoshopped pictures, such as Khomeini’s head on Jennifer Lopez’s body. The interrogator said that this was insulting to Imam Khomeini. I pointed out to him that they weren’t my pictures. In our newspaper, 12 people had user IDs and could log into any computer. The pictures were not necessarily mine. Furthermore, as the Editor-in-Chief, I was smarter than to save such things on my computer.
38. Another charge was “propaganda activities against the regime.” The interrogator noted that in my blog, I had written that “Hosni Mubarak, the President of Egypt, had put [Iran] to shame.” He was referring to an article that I had written about Hosni Mubarak giving general amnesty to all the prisoners in August of 2003. I had written that Iran should learn from him. The regime’s position is that Mubarak is a dictator and his elections are a formality since he gets 100% of the votes. But I believed that Iran must learn from Mubarak’s actions. Why did we have political prisoners? At this time, Mashallah Shamsolvaezin and Emadeddin Baghi were in prison. They told me that what I had written was propaganda against the regime.

39. There were a lot of other charges, but the one that took up most of our time was in connection with interviews I had conducted with *RadioFarda* under my pseudonym. They accused me of being a CIA spy and collaborating with *RadioFarda*. They claimed that because Colin Powell is on *RadioFarda's* executive board, is active in the military and part of the “leading council of the CIA,” I was effectively an employee of the CIA. I denied that I had ever worked for the CIA or *RadioFarda*. They responded that they had transcripts of my radio interviews. I told them that I had only conducted one interview, but they noted that I had in fact conducted many more under the pseudonym of “Kambiz Karimi.” Then the intelligence interrogator opened a file containing 40 interviews of Kambiz Karimi, along with analysis of the interviews by the Iran desk at the Intelligence Ministry. The Ministry of Intelligence in Tehran has established different desks for monitoring different activities. At the time, *RadioFarda* had its own table. The Ministry also monitored the activities of certain websites and weblogs, which had their own special desks. *RadioFarda's* desk had written a report for all my interviews and had taken the voice files and compared them. They had done a lot of sophisticated things to put this analysis together. They produced a CD of all my interviews and asked if I wanted to hear them. I told them that the CD doesn't prove anything because I was a journalist, and according to Iranian Press Law, use of a pseudonym is a journalist's right. I also chastised them for forcing journalists to use pseudonyms by creating unsafe working conditions for journalists. When I said this, the officer got up and said, “Arash, cooperate with us. It is to your benefit to do so.”
40. I noticed that I couldn't get through to them, so I repeated what I had said the day before, which was that I wouldn't talk until my lawyer was present. They asked who my lawyer was and I said Mohammad Seifzadeh. They responded that Seifzadeh was “another jackass worse than [me]!” At that point, their behavior and attitude towards me became completely offensive and hostile. The judge told me to get out. It was close to 1:00 p.m.
41. There were few other rooms and judges at the court house. I stood in the corridor for three hours. The Revolutionary Court has jurisdiction over drug- and security-related crimes. Many of the people who were also waiting in the corridor with me were drug addicts. They were sitting on the floor. I didn't want to sit on the floor like them. I considered it a defeat, so I stood there for the duration of the time.
42. Judge Eskandari called me back into the courtroom. He called out 15 charges against me: insulting the Imam Khomeini, insulting the leader, insulting the sources of emulation, insulting the holy faith of Islam, propaganda activity against the regime, spying for the CIA, disclosing intelligence, insulting the head of the Expediency Discernment Council, and many other similar charges. He further added insulting individuals such as President Mohammad Khatami, Head of the Expediency Council Hashemi Rafsanjani, Nategh-Nouri—he just kept adding names. He then told me to sign the charge sheet. So I wrote: “I, Arash Sigarchi, in the right state of mind and health, having in mind Article 25, 26, 66, and 138 of the Constitution and other articles, announce that this court is closed and is in session without my lawyer and a jury. And I do not accept any of the charges against me.” Eskandari read my writing and said, “With this signature you have dug your own grave.” He then told me to get out.
43. After a few minutes, two plainclothes intelligence officers came and called me. As they came in, they pushed back their jackets to show that they were armed. The judge ordered them to cuff me and take me away. One of them flashed his gun again and said, “Handcuffs won't be necessary ... ” as if to suggest that if I were to run away he would shoot me. The officer was much taller than me, but I tapped him on the arm and informed him that had I wanted to run away, I would have done so a long time ago. My charges were then explained to me. I was

afraid of what they were going to do to me. According to the Iranian Criminal Code, bail had to be issued so I could put money down and not go to prison. I raised this issue and the judge set bail at 200 million *tomans* (\$250,000)! Prior to this, the only other case that had such high bail was that of Hashem Aghajari, who was sentenced to death with a bail of 50 million *tomans*. This really scared me, because my bail was four times his. What were they going to do to me—execute me four times over?

## **My Imprisonment and Torture**

44. I was imprisoned for two months before I was finally released on bail. The first 20 days, I was in solitary confinement and 15 of those I was tortured. I was placed in a cell that was 1 meter by 1 meter, so there was no room to sit or sleep. It was winter in Rasht, which made my cell cold and humid. Day one, they beat me. Day two, a group of soldiers beat me some more. Day three, my interrogator, Mr. Samadi, arrived and when I complained, he said that he had no authority at the prison. He said that a man named Alami was now in charge of my case file. Later, I realized that Alami was in charge of Rasht Prison's Protection Office. In prison, there are two units for supervision. One is an investigating unit that supervises everyone, like prisoners, social workers, and officials. The other is the prison protection unit that supervises everything including the work of the prison protection unit.
45. On the fifth day, they hung me from a fan. There was a pole attached to an engine on the ceiling that would propel me around the room. My arms were attached to another pole, as if I was on a cross. The two poles were connected. When the engine was turned on I literally became a human fan. On the sixth day, in the middle of the torture session, they told me that my mother was coming to visit. She came, but it was a very short visit and I wasn't allowed to talk. They threatened to torture me if I did. On the seventh day, they made me stand outside in the bitter cold for three hours. On the eighth day, they gave me a photocopy of *Kayhan* newspaper, which read: "Arash S, who was collaborating with the CIA in the north of the country, is sentenced to one-time execution." On the ninth day, I was taken to a room where the floor was covered with feces. Around 3:00 or 4:00 a.m., they took me out to bathe and sent me back to my cell. I was there for 2-3 hours when they came in and bastinadoed the soles of my feet. On the tenth day, they took me to a room where there was a noose and a video camera. They told me that they would either execute me or film my confession. On the twelfth day, they pulled both of my big toe nails out. That same day, they imposed a form of torture that was literally called *Jujih Kabab*, or grilled chicken. They tied my wrists between my ankles and put a rod through it. Then they fastened my arms and legs to the rod and suspended me upside down.
46. On the 13<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> days, they took me to court and I found that my all my family and relations were there. My parents and brothers were in the judge's chamber. The judge said, "Come here and sign this," and gave me a piece of paper that listed ten to twelve crimes for which I was to be executed. I consented and wrote, "I have no objections." This is what Aghajari had done as well. I suspected that they would not actually go through with it. During the same time, the judge was talking to my father. I heard him tell my father that I am "a brave kid," and that I would be pardoned. Then he told his secretary to tear up the paper I had just signed. In prison, they called this type of act "verdict of terror." My brother, Ashkan, came over and hugged me and placed a piece of paper in my hand that I placed in my mouth so the guards wouldn't find it. When I returned to my cell and opened the paper, I found that my brother had printed out all the titles of articles that were written about me in very small font. It was around 12:00 or 1:00 p.m. in the afternoon when I read this.

47. Around 4:00 or 5:00 p.m., the officer came to interrogate me again. He asked whether I was ready to confess in front of the camera. I quoted from the articles and said, "Don't you know... 'The day after tomorrow is the day Arash Sigarchi is going to be released.'" He was really shocked. I informed him that Seifzadeh had accepted me as a client, and Shirin Ebadi was going to be my lawyer as well. He got angry, but I told him that I would no longer answer his questions. They sent me to another solitary cell for an additional five days. All together I was in solitary confinement for a total of 20 days. After that, they sent me to the general prison, amongst the murders, killers, and drug dealers.
48. What they ultimately wanted from me was an interview where I would confess that I received money from the CIA and that I had formed a team with *RadioFarda* in order to form a network of journalists for them in all the provinces of Iran. One of the more absurd charges they wanted me to confess to was that I had conspired to build a network against the Islamic Republic, which was based on my brief correspondence with a journalist in Shiraz whom I hadn't actually met. But I resisted, and they never got the confession they sought.

### **My Conviction, Sentencing and Appeal**

49. On February 11, 2005, my mother came to prison and informed me that my verdict had been issued. I had received 14 years' imprisonment. Up to this point, I had not yet seen my lawyers. Seifzadeh accepted me as a client after I received my trial verdict, which was around late February. However, they wouldn't allow him to pursue my case. Not until I received my verdict on February 7, 2005, did the courts allow me to obtain a lawyer. Since it hadn't been announced that Seifzadeh was to represent me, Shirin Ebadi expressed interest in representing me and joined my legal team. Another attorney, by the name of Parviz Jahangir-Rad, ultimately joined the team as well.
50. My verdict was four pages long. In accordance with article 508 of Islamic Penal Code, I was to receive 10 years' imprisonment for collaboration with the hostile government of the United States through interviews with *RadioFarda*. In accordance with article 514 of the Islamic Penal Code, I was to receive two years for insulting Imam Khomeini and the Supreme Leader. In accordance with article 500 of the Islamic Penal Code, I was to receive one year for propaganda against the regime. In accordance with articles 512 and 610 of the Islamic Penal Code, I was to receive another year for creating confusion among the masses, creating anarchy and inciting the general public to revolt. I received the maximum sentence for all four of my indictments. The interrogator came to see me only once after I got the 14-year prison term. I quarreled with him and demanded to know why I had received 14 years. From that point on, we did not have any contact with each other anymore. I was told that if I apologized for what I had done, I would be forgiven. But I refused.
51. At the end of my two-month imprisonment, my lawyers met with me in prison. They appealed the terms of my sentence and my case file was directed to the appeals court. During the appeal process, I was released on bail on March 20, 2005. My appeal hearing was in June and we defended my case. There were three appeal judges: the hearing Judge, Qudrat'ullah Shamikhi; the advising Judge, Isma'il Hassanzadihi; and a third judge who did not sign my verdict, as he dissented with the decision. Seifzadeh did not defend me well; he got up and said "Due to the fact that Mr. Shahroudi called for the release of the bloggers and for the law to exercise leniency towards them, I request that you release my client." When I witnessed this, I got up and defended myself. Mr. Seifzadeh spoke from 9:00-9:15 a.m., and once he was done, I got up and defended myself until 2:00 p.m. All together, we defended my case for a total of three hours. The decision of the appeals court came in November 2005. I was

exonerated on the charge of ‘collaboration with a hostile government’ that carried the ten years’ imprisonment, as well as ‘creating confusion among the masses,’ which carried one year. For the charge of insulting Imam Khomeini and Supreme Leader, I received two years, and for propaganda against the Islamic Republic of Iran I received one year for a total of three years in prison. On January 25, 2006, I began my sentence.

52. According to Iranian law, I could appeal my case one more time before the Supreme Court. For this process, I kept Mr. Parviz Jahangir-Rad and retained Mr. Salih Nikbakht in place of the other two attorneys. On February 12, 2006, my brother, who was *en route* to take my power of attorney papers to the Supreme Court, died in a car accident. The next day I was given leave for ten days and then received an additional seven days. So from the 13<sup>th</sup> of February to March 1, 2006, I was on leave. Throughout 2006, most of which I spent in prison, every two to three months I received five days of leave. During the month of September, a sore appeared on the corner of my tongue. Since I had scored a few goals in the prison soccer tournament, they gave me a few days of leave during which I checked out the sore and was diagnosed with cancer. From November 2006, I received three months of leave which counted toward the time served on my sentence. After that I received another three months and two six-month leaves, which did not count as part of my sentence. Until May 18, 2008, I was on leave for treatment. Within this period, I had three months of chemotherapy, an eight-hour surgery that took out half of my tongue and some of my lymph nodes, and another month of radiotherapy. I left Iran on January 10, 2008, and came to America for treatment.
53. I truly believe that Judge Eskandari wanted to use my case to please the intelligence officers. For this reason, he gave me the maximum sentence on all the charges issued against me. It is also important to note that the security apparatus had just encountered the weblogging phenomenon and wanted to paralyze bloggers with fear by dealing with them decisively. In truth, it did create fear. Everyone thought that if I, who was the Editor-in-Chief of a newspaper, was sentenced to 14 years’ imprisonment for weblogging, what would happen to them? What was different about my case file was that the complainant was the Ministry of Intelligence, making it more official. For the other cases, the complainants were the parallel intelligence agencies of *Sepah*, who didn’t have as apparent an identity. The Ministry of Intelligence is in charge of the security of the Islamic Republic and is, after all, a ministry. Their interrogation sheets have a heading with the name of the ministry and the unit in charge of interrogation. However, in regard to the parallel intelligence agency, the summons were without a written order and very unofficial. The lack of knowledge regarding those detaining the prisoners, and the fact that the detainees did not know where they were and what organ arrested them, meant that the arrests were unofficial. I received and still have in my possession my summons and verdicts.
54. In my sentence, the Ministry of Intelligence requested that I be exiled to one of the central or southern provinces within the country due to the risk that I could be dangerous and take the opportunity to flee. In some instances in Iran, the accused is sentenced to exile in a city far away from where he resides. In the Iranian penal code, there are cities mentioned such as Izeh, Masjed Soleyman, Ramhormoz and others that are specifically considered in cases of exile. The person who issues the verdict can choose one of those cities as the place of exile for the prisoner. Since this was not possible and I was not dangerous, this request was denied.



**Look for the following to come from IHRDC:**

- Statements by witnesses to the **1988 prison massacres**
- The Islamic Republic of Iran's **abuse of human rights** following the June 12, 2009 presidential election



Arash Sigarchi was arrested in December 2004 and sentenced to 14 years for his allegedly illegal cyber-journalist and blogging activities. He was released on bail in March 2005. In December 2005, an appeals court reduced his sentence to 3 years' imprisonment. While in prison, Sigarchi developed cancer of the tongue. He spent the next several months in and out of prison. On January 10, 2008, he left Iran for treatment and has not returned. He is pictured above left with prominent reformist and former Vice President to Mohammad Khatami, Mohammad-Ali Abtahi, who was imprisoned following the June 12th election.