**Iran arrests two Catholics in new wave of brutality against Christians**

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Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) arrested two Christians – a mother and her son – in late February as part of a brutal crackdown on Catholicism in the country’s West Azerbaijan Province.

The family’s bibles and literature on Christian theology were also seized during the draconian raid, according to a March 5 report on the website of the Iranian Christian News Agency, Mohabat.

“The arrest of two newly Christian converts – Anousheh Rezabakhsh and Soheil Zargarzadeh (mother and son, respectively) – in Urmia, a northern city in Iran, is very sad and concerning, especially as they both are dealing with health issues. It’s been more than two weeks that Iranian authorities have not provided any news on them,” Eliot Assoudeh, an Iranian-American academic at University of Nevada, told Fox News on Wednesday.

He said Christianity is the fastest-growing religion in Iran, and many Christian converts “have to risk their lives attending underground churches."

Assoudeh, who recently presented an article on The Islamic Republic of Iran: Between Theocracy and ‘Clerical Fascism,’ said the U.S. should do more to protect Christians across the world who are under attack.

“The United States, its Western allies, and the international human rights organizations should show their concern, call on the Islamic Republic authorities and demand the immediate release of these two Christians,” he said.

The IRGC forced  Rezabakhsh and Zargarzadeh, a psychology student, from their home and took them to an undisclosed detention facility. The Mohabat wrote that religious minorities arrested in Urmia “are normally detained in the Revolutionary Guards Intelligence building.”

Urmia—a city of nearly 700,000—is famous for housing the Cathedral of St. Mary, the Mother of God whose origin dates back to the 16th century.

Julie Lenarz, the executive director of the London-based Human Security Centre, told FoxNews.com that many Christians “are convicted in sham trials and linger in jail for years as prisoners of conscience. They face harassment, torture or even execution.”

She said these groups are specifically targeting converts.

“Leaving Islam or converting to another religion is punishable by death in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” Lenarz said.

A recent report by Open Door USA—an organization that tracks the persecution of Christians—ranked Iran as the eighth worst country for Christians.

In December, 19 human rights organization called on international communities to protect the rights of Christians in Iran.

Iran ramped up its persecution of Christians in 2016. In the past year, at least 79 Iranian Christians have been arrested.

“In Iran’s post-1979 Revolution, unfortunately, we are dealing with an ideological system based on supremacy of a Shia culture, which has shown hostility towards ethnic and religious minorities,” Assoudeh said.

Iran’s UN diplomatic missions in New York and Geneva did not immediately return phone calls from Fox News seeking comment.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani is slated to run for reelection in May. Critics say he has hoodwinked the West by depicting himself as a reformer when he is, in fact, a hardliner.

“The Islamic Republic is master of spectacle politics to gain international legitimacy,” Assoudeh said. “Last December, in a theatrical ceremony President Hassan Rouhani signed ‘Charter on Citizen’s Right,’ in which there is no indication of rights for citizens to practice their chosen faith.”

"He said the Islamic Republic's ideology facilitates a "license to hate" to a "license to kill."

'Look at the mass persecution of religious minorities, including Baha’i people in Iran,” he said.

The 125,000-member IRGC has a long record of violently repressing Christians and democracy movements opposed to the mullah-regime. The long arm of the IRGC played a key role in the murder of 19 U.S. military members in the1996 Khobar Tower bombing in Saudi Arabia.

The IRGC also plotted to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the U.S. in Washington in a high-end Georgetown restaurant in 2011. In 2013, Mannsor Arbabsiar pleaded guilty for his role as the assassin hired to bomb ambassador Adel al-Jubeir. He was sentenced to a 25-year prison term.

President Donald Trump’s administration is deliberating over a proposal to classify the IRGC as a terrorist organization.

A spokesman for Rep. Peter Roskam, R-Illinois, said the congressman is pushing to classify the Iranian force as a terror group and supports other sanctions against the Islamic republic as well.

"He believes we should strengthen sanctions against Iran for their support of terrorism, illegal ballistic missile program, and human right record," the spokesman said.

The U.S. Treasury designated the IRGC’s Qods Force—an elite commando group—a terrorist entity in 2007.