

## Celebrating Nowruz



*Nowruz Haft-sin table*

### **1) What is Nowruz?**

Nowruz [pronounced NO-ROOZ- in Persian means "New-day"] is the Iranian New Year and marks the first day of Spring. Nowruz begins precisely with the beginning of Spring on the vernal equinox; on the 1st day of Farvardin of the Iranian solar calendar which is usually March 20th or 21st. It is the biggest holiday celebrated by Iranians and is a time of great joy and family celebration that is shared by people of all faiths that trace their history back through the centuries to the ancient Mesopotamian civilization and the Persian Empire. It has been celebrated for at least 3,000 years and is rooted in the rituals and traditions of the Zoroastrian religion.

## **2) Plan a Nowruz Event**

Nowruz is a great opportunity to not only bring awareness to the human rights situation in Iran, but to bring communities together to celebrate, learn about Iranian culture, and make new friends. On such a joyful occasion, so many Iranians are behind bars and away from their families; their seats at the celebration remains empty. Help let them know that we remember them, and are thinking about them by writing on behalf of Iranian prisoners and/or sending solidarity messages to their families.

In the past several years, successful events were held in Toronto and a couple of other Canadian cities. This year, we are hoping for even more people across Canada and around the world to get involved.

If you have been thinking about how you can raise awareness amongst your Amnesty group, your community or even your friends, think about organizing a Nowruz gathering. Your events can include fun, awareness-raising and advocacy, all at the same time.



*Human Rights Haft-sin. Nowruz event by Amnesty International Iran Action Circle in Toronto, Canada. March 2014*

### **3) Ideas and suggestion for a Nowruz event**

Celebrating Nowruz does not have to be a huge event. You can raise awareness by taking time to talk about Iran, its people, its history and its challenges and needless to say, by taking action! Here are some suggestions:

- ✧ Do you enjoy cooking? Consider inviting friends over for dinner to sample some Iranian dishes. Need recipes? visit [mypersiankitchen.com/](http://mypersiankitchen.com/)). Organize a potluck if you want to assign a dish to those you have invited.
  
- ✧ Movie night: Organize a movie night.
  
- ✧ Poetry night: poetry has been always part of Iranian culture since ancient time. There are great Iranian poets (classic and contemporary) whom we can point you to for a wonderful poetry night.
  
- ✧ Book club discussion: there are some fantastic books on Iran with social and human rights underlying tone for a book club discussion.
  
- ✧ Go all the way: You can also include a “Haft-sin (aka Haft-sinn and Haft-seen)” table. Haft-sin or **the seven 'S's** is a traditional table setting of Nowruz. The Haft-sin table includes seven items all starting with the letter *seen* (س) in the Persian alphabet. Each "س" is a symbol. Check the following link for more information: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haft-Sin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haft-Sin)
  
- ✧ If none of the above is possible or does interest you, please consider taking action on behalf of seven prisoners in Iran – as an individual or in a group. We are asking activists to send Nowruz greetings to the prisoners featured in this action along with writing on their behalf. Following the great initiative by Amnesty USA, we are including seven cases in honor of the Haft-Sin (the seven 'S's) tradition.

*And please don't forget to share the news and photos from your event with us!*



### **Nowruz Action**

### کارزار نوروز

The Iranian holiday Nowruz نوروز (“New Day”) is an ancient holiday celebrated on the first day of spring to welcome in the New year. On this Nowruz we want to remember several prisoners in Iran with Nowruz greetings. We ask you to send cards with simple Nowruz greetings such as “Nowruz mobarak” نوروز مبارک

You can say “thinking of you at Nowruz time” or “hoping you are well.” You may send a greeting in either English or Farsi (Persian) but please do not mention Amnesty International or specifics of the recipient’s case. Please also refrain from mentioning the political situation or human rights. We suggest sending cards with pictures of landscapes, spring flowers or the like, in keeping with the spirit of the holiday and the message of hope and renewal. Please do not choose cards that have pictures of people, and please do not use cards that depict bottles of wine or other alcoholic beverages. Non-religious cards are strongly recommended.

Traditional Nowruz celebrations include the preparation of a Haft Sin table which literally means the seven s’s. Seven items beginning with the Persian letter sin (equivalent to the English s) and which represent spring time are set out. To honor this tradition, this year Amnesty International has selected seven cases, all of them prisoners for whom we have been campaigning. Several of them have been sentenced to long prison terms for their peaceful activism and several are in poor health.

Our previous Nowruz actions have been very successful! Hundreds of letters and solidarity messages were sent from Amnesty members across Canada. While there have been positive developments, it is only one step in our campaign to prevent and end grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination. Writing letters has real impact on real lives. Be it an advocacy action or a solidarity one, your efforts really matter!

Please see next pages.



## Mahvash Sabet



Photo: PEN International

Mahvash Sabet is a 62-year-old leader in the persecuted minority religious community of the Baha'i, serving a **10-year** prison sentence (out of 20-years' imprisonment) at Evin Prison in Tehran. She is a former teacher and poet and the director of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, an alternative school for Baha'i youth prohibited from attending the university. Mahvash Sabet was also the secretary of the informal group known as the "Yaran", or "Friends," which catered to the spiritual and social needs of the Iranian Baha'is.

Mahvash Sabet – along with other six leaders of Baha'i community - was arrested in 2008 on vaguely worded charges related to national security. The seven Baha'i leaders were finally convicted in 2010 of "espionage for Israel," "insulting religious sanctities," and "propaganda against the system".

On 19 December 2013 the seven Baha'i leaders wrote a joint open letter to President Hassan Rouhani. In the letter they expressed their happiness over Rouhani's invitation to have an open discussion regarding civil rights, but added that they are writing the letter from inside the prison and they have been imprisoned for more than five years solely because of their faith. They continued on to say that "the arrest of thousands of Baha'i citizens and their 20 years prison sentences confirm the discrimination and racism present in the society and the instability of law to protect the minorities".

While imprisoned, Mahvash Sabet has published a collection of poetry collectively entitled "Prison Poems". In poem entitled The Perfume of Poetry, Mahvash Sabet writes of her fellow prisoners in the women's ward:

*I write if only to stir faint memories of flight  
in these wing-bound birds,  
to open the cage of the heart for a moment  
trapped without words.*

*For how can one not faint for these women,  
beaten so brutally?  
How can one not fear for them, suffering  
such tyrannical cruelty?*

You can send Nowruz greetings for Mahvash Sabet and/or her family via:  
Iran Coordinator, Amnesty International  
1992 Yonge St. 3rd floor  
Toronto ON  
M4S 1Z7

**(DO NOT MENTION AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL)**

## Saeed Malekpour



Saeed Malekpour, a web programmer, is a permanent resident of Canada and Iranian national. Saeed Malekpour is serving a **life sentence** in Evin Prison. He was originally sentenced to death in 2010 for “insulting and desecrating Islam” after a software package he had developed was used without his knowledge to post pornographic images online.

Saeed Malekpour had been living in Canada since 2005, but was arrested in October 2008 while visiting his family in Iran. Following his arrest, Saeed Malekpour was held in solitary confinement for more than one year during which he was allegedly tortured. In 2009, Iranian state television repeatedly aired his “confession.” In an open letter dated March 2010,

Saeed Malekpour stated his “confession” was extracted after prolonged torture following orders by Revolutionary Guard interrogators.

Saeed Malekpour was sentenced to death in December 2010 following a trial that reportedly only lasted 15 minutes. For much of his detention Saeed Malekpour had limited access to legal counsel. In December 2012 Saeed Malekpour’s lawyer reported that Saeed Malekpour’s death sentence was suspended. His family subsequently reported the death sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment.

In June 2014, the imprisoned web programmer Saeed Malekpour was transferred to a general ward after spending about 3 years under a ward controlled by Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps.

Saeed Malekpour’s arrest in October 2008 was in relation to alleged cybercrime. In 2009, a group reportedly affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards, alleged that some individuals, including Saeed Malekpour, were part of “a network of decadence on the internet.” The 2009 Law on Cyber Crimes in Iran extended the death penalty to such crimes. A relatively new and shadowy “cyber army”, reportedly linked to the Revolutionary Guards, has also carried out attacks on websites at home and abroad, including the Twitter site and Voice of America.

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## Mohammad Ali Taheri



**Mohammad Ali Taheri**, a spiritual teacher, was previously sentenced to death in Iran on charge of “spreading corruption on earth” through his spiritual beliefs and teachings. His death sentence was quashed in December 2015 by the Supreme Court, sending his case back to the court for further investigations.

Amnesty International considers Mohammad Ali Taheri a prisoner of conscience and urges the Iranian authorities to drop all the charges against him and release him immediately and unconditionally.

Mohammad Ali Taheri is the founder of the spiritual doctrine “Erfan-e Keyhani AKA Erfan-e Halgheh.” In 2006 he lawfully opened a cultural and educational institute in Tehran to develop and disseminate his newly found spiritual beliefs, and practice them with his students, in “healing sessions” apparently focused on alternative non-medicinal treatments. But things changed in 2010 when three offices of the institute in Tehran were shut down. He was arrested in May 2011 and he's been in solitary confinement since then. In October 2011 he was sentenced to **5-years**’ imprisonment, **74 lashes** and a fine of nine billion rials on several offences, including “insulting Islamic sanctities”.

Shortly before the end of his sentence, he was tried again and received a death sentence in August 2015 for “spreading corruption on earth” (efsad-e fel-arz). Amnesty International understands that the new charges and sentencing (which has since been quashed) were based on the same spiritual teachings and practices which were relied upon to convict him in October 2011.

Mohammad Ali Taheri has been suffering in prolonged solitary confinement in Section 2A of Tehran’s Evin Prison. He has attempted suicide four times in protest of his prison conditions including, a lack of access to his family and lawyer and repeated threats from the authorities to kill him and his wife and children. He has started his 14<sup>th</sup> hunger strike in February 2016.

You can send Nowruz greetings to Mohammad Ali Taheri and/or his family via:

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## Narges Mohammadi



Narges Mohammadi is a human rights activist who has been a vocal advocate against death penalty. She is a prisoner of conscience on trial for charges stemming from her human rights activities. The charges include “membership of an illegal organization whose aim is to harm national security”, related to her founding of *Step by Step to Stop Death Penalty*, a group campaigning against the death penalty in Iran.

Narges Mohammadi has been in and out of prison for more than a decade for her support of human rights in Iran. She was last arrested at her home in May 2015 after security forces

threatened to break down her front door if she did not open it. She was taken to Evin Prison where she has been since.

Narges is critically ill and need specialized treatment. She suffers from pulmonary embolism (a blood clot in her lungs) and a neurological disorder that can result in seizures and temporary partial paralysis. She was taken to hospital in October 2015 but was returned to Evin Prison a couple of weeks later against her doctor’s advice.

As well as being denied urgent medical care, Narges Mohammadi is not allowed to make phone calls to her children, eight-year old twins who recently moved to live with their father, a refugee abroad, as they had no caregiver in Iran after their mother's arrest.

Narges Mohammadi was previously sentenced to a **6-year** prison term. She was the Executive Chair of the Centre for Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) before the authorities shut it down in December 2008. Several others of the Centre’s members have been persecuted including prominent human rights lawyers Abdolfattah Soltani and Mohammad Seifzadeh, both currently serving prison terms.

Over the years, Narges Mohammadi has earned prizes for her human rights work in several countries which she was unable to collect. Since 2009, she has been banned from traveling abroad.

You can send Nowruz greetings to Narges Mohammadi and/or her family via:  
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## Mostafa Azizi



Mostafa Azizi, a permanent resident of Canada, has been sentenced to **8-years'** imprisonment. Azizi, a writer and film producer has been convicted of vague and overly broad national security-related offences for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression, including by posting on Facebook.

Mostafa Azizi had travelled from Canada to Iran in late December 2014 to visit his ailing father and consider the possibility of moving back to his home country. He was arrested in February 2015.

The sentence came after an unfair trial on 1 June 2015 which lasted a few hours and relied on evidence gathered by Revolutionary Guard officials during the 33 days they held Mostafa Azizi in solitary confinement in Section 2A of Tehran's Evin Prison with no access to his family or a lawyer. Charges against Mostafa Azizi included "gathering and colluding against national security", "insulting Iran's Supreme Leader", and "spreading propaganda against the system".

Mostafa Azizi told his son that during his trial, the prosecutor included as "evidence" at least two printouts of his Facebook posts. One post was a photo of Mostafa Azizi during the Pride Parade in Toronto, Canada.

Mostafa Azizi, now held in Section 8 of Evin Prison is currently awaiting the decision of the Appeals Court held in September 2015.

Section 8 of Evin Prison houses hundreds of prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, who are believed to be held in severely overcrowded, poorly ventilated, filthy cells infested with insects and lacking adequate sleeping and sanitation facilities. Such conditions of detention are aggravating Mostafa Azizi's pre-existing health conditions, which include asthma, eczema, rheumatism and high blood sugar.

You can send Nowruz greeting and/or birthday cards for Mohammad and/or his family via:

Iran Coordinator  
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## Bahareh Hedayat



Behareh Hedayat, is an activist with the women's rights organization *The Campaign for Equality*, and is also a member of the Central Committee of the Office for the Consolidation of Unity, a national student body which has been active in calling for political reform and opposing human rights violations in recent years. She is currently serving a **10-year** prison sentence in Evin Prison.

She was arrested on 31 December 2009, shortly after mass arrests following anti-government protests on the religious festival of Ashoura. She was charged with several "offences", including "interviews with foreign media," "insulting the leader," "insulting the president," and "disrupting public order through participating in illegal gatherings." In May 2010 she was sentenced to six months in prison for "insulting the president", two years for "insulting the Leader" and five years for "acting against national security." A two-year suspended prison term previously imposed for her participation in the June 2006 demonstration calling for an end to discrimination against women in law was also implemented. An additional six-month sentence was added as punishment for having written a letter, together with fellow imprisoned student activist Majid Tavakkoli, in December 2010, encouraging students to continue their peaceful struggle for freedom.

In an interview with the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran (ICHRI) on 17 January 2014, Bahareh Hedayat's husband, Amin Ahmadian, told the Campaign that Hedayat had been experiencing serious health issues that could potentially leave her sterile if left untreated.

On the occasion of Iran's student day, 8 December 2013, Bahareh Hedayat and three other student activists, Hassan Asadi Zeidabadi, Imad Bahavar and Abdoullah Moumeni wrote a letter to President Rouhani. In this open letter they asked President Rouhani to "repair the relationship between university students and the government".

Bahareh Hedayat's birthday falls on April 5. She will turn 35 behind the bars.

You can send Nowruz and/or birthday greetings to Bahareh Hedayat and/or her family via:

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## Hossein Rafiee



Retired university professor and prolific writer, Hossein Rafiee has begun serving a **4-year** prison sentence handed down in 2004 for his peaceful political activism. He is 70 and has several health problems, including high blood pressure and a heart condition.

Hossein Rafiee was arrested without a warrant by Ministry of Intelligence officials on 16 June 2015. He only found out the reason for his arrest after about a month later, when he was told he had to start serving his 2004 sentence for “membership of an illegal group”, Melli Mazhabi (National Religious Alliance).

In May 2015, Hossein Rafiee received an additional **6-year** prison term by Branch 15 of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, over his writings on social and political issues on his website. Charges against him were “membership of an illegal and anti-national security group [Melli Mazhabi]”, “spreading propaganda against the system” by giving interviews to media “who are against the state” and for “issuing statements against the state’s security”. Hossein Rafiee lodged an appeal and hearing was held in January 2016 without his presence. The appeal court upheld Mohammad Rafiee's 6-year prison term.

Hossein Rafiee, currently held in Section 8 of Evin Prison, has detailed the severe overcrowding of the section: he shares his 20 square metre cell with 27 others, and sleeps on the floor, along with nine other men, as there are only six three bunk beds in the cell. Hossein Rafiee has told his daughter, “I wonder if we are in a prison or a torture chamber.” He has also said that Section 8 has only five toilets and showers for approximately 200 prisoners, and there are constant queues for the bathroom or showers. While the section has a doctor on staff, the doctor has no medical equipment, so Hossein Rafiee’s blood pressure is not being monitored regularly.

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