

The following article, written by Jeff Danna, appeared in the Chicago Tribune on July 15, 2012 at [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-07-15/news/ct-met-highland-park-family-iran-20120715\\_1\\_baha-is-islamic-republic-zoroastrians](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-07-15/news/ct-met-highland-park-family-iran-20120715_1_baha-is-islamic-republic-zoroastrians).

Highland Park resident Nasrin Nakhaei learned in May that her 85-year-old father, Muhammad-Husayn Nakha'i, had been arrested and jailed in his home country of Iran. The government has not said why it arrested him, Nakhaei said, but the family suspects it's because of his Baha'i faith. Nakhaei, 48, who has lived in the United States for 11 years, learned what happened from relatives. Although the Iranian government has given the family no formal reason for the arrest, Nakhaei, her relatives and members of the Baha'i faith said the worshippers are a religious minority in the Islamic Republic. Human rights advocates say the Baha'is there have long been persecuted — even though the religion began in Iran more than 150 years ago.

Nakhaei said her sister was browsing the Internet in May when she found an international website that reported their father had been arrested. The siblings confirmed the detainment with their aunt in Iran, who said Nakha'i told family members not to worry his children with the news.

Now, while the family tries to arrange his release, Nakhaei frets about dangerous criminals with whom her father might be sharing a cell.

"I couldn't sleep at night when I heard my father is with these people," Nakhaei said. "My father is a very good man. He doesn't think about himself — he thinks about other people."

It's not the first time her father has been arrested in Iran, Nakhaei said. He spent five years in prison in the 1980s, also because of his faith, she said, adding that she regularly prays for her father.

The Baha'i community in Highland Park has lent its support, too. About 30 Baha'is live in the

North Shore suburb, forming a circle of people who know Nakhaei and are familiar with her father's imprisonment, said Tom Gindorff, 65.

When Nakhaei told the Baha'is about her father, they immediately prayed, said Gindorff, who is part of the nine-member local Baha'i assembly.

"You and I can't even imagine how bad it is or how scary it is," he said.

Although the Baha'i religion originated in Iran, it has long been viewed with skepticism in the country, where Islam is the official faith, experts say. Baha'is believe the religion's founder, Baha'u'llah, is the most recent in a series of prophets who include Islam's prophet, Muhammad.

"Baha'is are viewed (in Iran) as apostate or heretics because they claim truth after Muhammad," said Dwight Bashir, deputy director of policy for the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.**

Representatives for the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations and the Interests Section of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the Embassy of Pakistan in Washington, D.C., could not be reached for comment.

Unlike recognized religious minorities in Iran — Assyrian and Armenian Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians — Baha'is are not reserved seats in Iran's parliament. But Baha'is and human rights advocates say the struggle in Iran is not about politics.

About 300,000 Baha'is live in Iran. About 100 are in prison, Bashir said. That's the largest number in jail since the early 1980s, in the wake of the Iranian Revolution, he said. Baha'is who are put on trial typically face charges such as blasphemy and espionage, Bashir said. Some have been executed.

Nakhaei said that while growing up in Iran, she and her family were routinely subject to ridicule

because of their Baha'i faith. People would call them offensive names and throw rocks at them, she said.

"We didn't get sad or mad," she said. The family reasoned that a lack of knowledge about the faith, which teaches the oneness of God and the world's religions, drove the animosity.

Over the years, harassment from average Iranian citizens slowed, Nakhaei said. Some experts agree. Anthony Vance, director of public affairs for the Baha'is of the United States, said that more than 200 prominent Iranians and people of Iranian descent from around the world wrote an open letter saying they are ashamed of the way Baha'is are treated in Iran.

"I think the majority of Iranian people, like we do (in the United States), want to live peacefully with their neighbors," said Reza Marashi, research director at the National Iranian American Council.

But it is still hard for Baha'is in Iran to enroll in institutes of higher education and find employment, Bashir said. Such treatment led Nakhaei and her three sisters to leave Iran for other countries — the United States, Italy, Turkey and Venezuela.

Nakhaei also said an Iranian lawyer who initially agreed to represent the imprisoned Nakha'i backed off the case once she fell under government suspicion for working with Baha'is.

The lack of legal representation has compounded Nakhaei's frustration. Her relatives live far from the prison where her father is detained, and they have minimal contact with him, she said. While her father is in prison, her mother, who has Alzheimer's disease, is living in Italy with another daughter.

Nakhaei said she has asked her parents several times why they won't leave Iran. She even applied for a U.S. green card this year on their behalf, but her father was adamant about staying put.

&quot;He said, 'We don't want to leave — this is our country,'&quot; Nakhaei said.

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