And Dubbo is home. This is my home. I have the same feeling, the same respect, the same desire to serve this place as I did for Iran.”

Farhad, who has been busy preparing a table full of fruit and sweet treats for us as he sits in his home, puts down a plate of baklava and laugh. “You know, it’s the strangest thing,” she says, “People often ask me, ‘Don’t you want to go home?’ But I say, ‘Why? I am home. I say, from the bottom of my heart, this is my home. It is a strange question to ask. I have been here for 24 years.’

The couple speaks openly and unselfconsciously about their faith, but without the dogmatic fervour that often accompanies deep religious devotion. Refreshingly, this is a couple that genuinely practises the gentle and inclusive teachings of one of the world’s most widespread religions, second only to Christianity in its geographical breadth.

And it’s testament to the comfort and guidance provided by the faith that its proponents have withstood the decades of persecution at the hands of an extremist Muslim regime. ‘This would never happen to the Baha’is. They are the most devoted to the Baha’i faith and gentle in their treatment. Since his incarceration at Evin Prison in Tehran following a ‘well-orchestrated offensive’ against Baha’i academics in which they were raided, computers, books and personal documents seized, Farhad has only been allowed to speak with his wife. He is apparently “as good as dead”, he is emotionally fragile and his family fears the conditions under which he is being held are such that both his mental and physical well-being are at stake.

“We are in constant contact with his wife and when we spoke to her after she had been allowed to speak with Farhad, she had to speak to us from somewhere outside her home, and her lines are being monitored,” Nasser says, adding that his sister-in-law pleads with them to “keep the pressure on the authorities and to raise awareness.”

Iran continues to hold a seat at the United Nations, despite its appalling record of human rights abuse, but, faithful to the Baha’i philosophy of goodwill and the eschewal of overt political action, Nasser is reluctant to criticise the credibility of the organisation.

“In 1979, Iran signed a covenant on human rights, recognising everyone’s right to education and freedom. We believe that higher education shall be made equally accessible to all on the basis of capacity but that has not been the case in Iran since 1979. The Iranian constitution claims there is freedom for all,” says Nasser, raising his hands in a gesture of incredulity. “Sadly, the will of the people is in opposition to the truth and the truth can be manipulated for the best benefit of an agenda.”

However, both Nasser and Farzarn believe that because of its blatant disregard for human rights, Iran is becoming increasingly isolated by the international community. “There are so many sanctions against it that Iranian government officials are viewed with suspicion and doubt wherever they go. There needs to be a complete change in the Iranian government — so there is democracy and freedom for everyone, respect and fairness for all. Then it doesn’t matter what religion those in power follow. Because we just want justice. Like all other religions, a true, Islamic faith is also about justice.”

Australia needs to continue to add its voice to international condemnation of the Islamic extremists’ persecution of Baha’is around the world. This is why public awareness is so important. Although they are killing Baha’is, it is part of our religion that we don’t fight back — we cannot take action,” says Nasser. “It’s not that we are sitting around doing nothing, oh well, shall be right. It’s just that we have to find a dignified way to help my brother, and all Baha’is.”

The family is acutely conscious of the mercurial nature of what perseveres for a judicial system in Iran. “The authorities are just waiting for an excuse to do something terrible, really, so we need to make sure nothing is done to make it worse. ‘Farhad’s wife said to us, ‘please tell the authorities this, please tell them the facts but please don’t come.’

Although working towards and praying for the safe delivery from incarceration of Farhad and others — including three of Farzarn’s cousins, one of whom is female — neither Nasser nor her husband will ever tell their Iranian family members to leave their homeland.

“We cannot tell them they must leave. Of course, we would like to see them out of harm’s way, and we would welcome them here in Australia, but we respect and understand their choice to stay.”

NASSER AND Farzarn have been overwhelmed by the support and goodwill shown by the Dubbo community and by the volume of correspondence received by federal member for Farzarn Cooton from citizens concerned at the human rights abuses being perpetrated against Baha’is in Iran.

“We want to thank you to the people who have taken the time to contact Mark Cosson to ask him to pass their concerns on to our government. We feel blessed to live in this community and this has shown us that we are genuinely embraced here,” says Nasser, who received the 2007 Dubbo City Community Service Award in recognition of her work in promoting harmony and multicultural activities, and who was similarly awarded the following year at ceremony at NSW Parliament for community service at a state level.

From Dubbo’s point of view, it’s the least we can do for one of our own. But it’s support that neither Nasser nor Farzarn will ever take for granted and they are humbled that the respect and love they feel for their community is reciprocated.

“There have been so many changes over the last few years — the whole structure of the world has changed. We are now part of a global community and that should create feeling for each other,” says Nasser.

“For instance, we are sitting here talking and I feel your concern for us,” says Nasser gently. “What you are doing — working about all this and helping us — this shows that we are part of this community and that there are no barriers here.”

How you can help:

If you would like to show your support and concern over the persecution of people of the Baha’i faith, you are encouraged to email or write letters calling on the Islamic Republic of Iran to immediately and unconditionally release the Baha’i community figures who are being held on spurious charges.

Iranian Ambassador to Australia
H.E. Dr. Mohammad Reza Shokri
Email: ambassadoriran@embassy.org.au

Minister for Foreign Affairs
The Hon. Kevin Rudd, MP
Email: Kevin.Rudd.MP@aph.gov.au

Federal Member for Parkes
Mr Mark Coulton
Email: mark.coulton.mp@aph.gov.au