

► 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."

Farzan, who has been busy preparing a table full of fruit and sweet treats for us as guests in her home, puts down a plate of baklava and laughs. "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 24 years."

The couple speaks openly and unselfconsciously of their faith, but without the dogmatic fervour that often accompanies deep religious devotion. Refreshingly, this is a couple that genuinely practices the gentle and inclusive teachings of one of the world's most widespread religions, second only to Christianity in its geographic 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 that would sorely test even those most devoted to the Baha'i's gentle and inclusive teachings.

SINCE his incarceration at Evin Prison in Tehran following a "well-orchestrated offensive" against Baha'i academics in which more than 30 homes were raided and computers, books and personal documents seized, Farhad has only been allowed to speak once with his wife. While he apparently "sounded good", 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 in contact with (Farhad), she had to speak to us from somewhere outside her home because their 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 1975, Iran signed a covenant on human rights recognising the right of everyone to an education and stating 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 government continues to claim there is freedom for all," says Nasser, raising his hands in a gesture of incredulity. "Sadly, the will of the people in power is strong and the truth can be manipulated for the best benefit of an agenda."

However, both Nasser and Farzan 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'i people in Iran. "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 violent action," says Nasser. "It's not that we are sitting around going, oh well, she'll 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 perversely passes for a judicial system in Iran. "The authorities there are just waiting for an excuse to do something really terrible, so we need to make sure nothing is done to make it worse."

"Farhad's wife said to us, 'please tell the

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authorities there, please tell them the facts but please be careful."

Although working towards and praying for the safe delivery from incarceration of Farhad and others – including three of Farzan's cousins, one of whom is female – neither Nasser nor his wife 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 Farzan have been overwhelmed by the support and good wishes extended by the Dubbo community and by the volume of correspondence received by federal member for Parkes Mark Coulton from citizens concerned at the human rights abuses being perpetrated against Baha'is in Iran.

"We want to say thank you to the people who have taken the time to contact Mark Coulton 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 his 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 Farzan will ever take for granted and they are humbled that the respect and love they feel for their community is reciprocated.

"Things have changed so much in 50 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.

"For instance, we are sitting here talking and I feel your concern for us," says Nasser gently. "What you are doing – writing 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'is currently being held on spurious 'charges'.

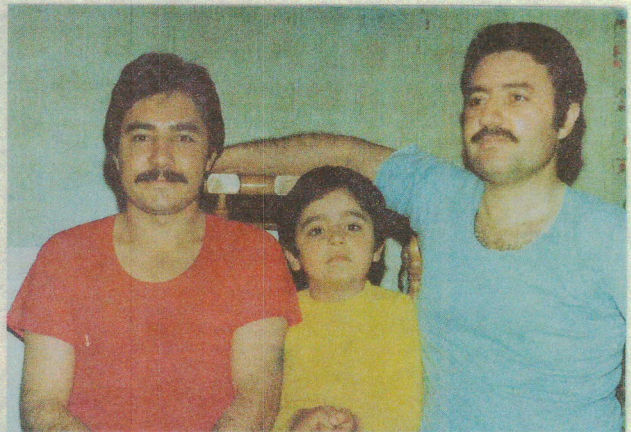
Iranian Ambassador to Australia
His Excellency Dr Mahmoud Babae
Email: ambassador@iranembassy.org.au

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

Federal Member for Parkes
Mr Mark Coulton
Email: mark.coulton.mpi@daph.gov.au

About the Baha'i faith

- Founded 180 years ago in Iran by the Prophet Baha'u'llah (born in Persia in 1817, the son of a government minister).
- Upon his death in 1892, his son Abdu'l-Baha assumed leadership and directed the affairs of the Baha'i community, and was known for his 'great acts of philanthropy and service' to humanity.
- An independent religion based on the notion that there is one God who is the source of all the world's great faiths; that one God at times sent different messengers – Jesus, Mohammed, Krishna, Buddha and so on. "In short, each messenger brings a faith suited to the needs and capacities of the society in which he has arisen and Baha'is believe this accounts for the differences between the various faiths."
- The Universal House of Justice is the head of the Baha'i administrative structure – an international governing council that consists of nine members who are elected every five years.
- Six million followers worldwide – with a geographic spread second only to Christianity.
- Baha'is believe in equal status for women and men – in firm partnerships between women and men in achieving equality, encouraging both to support women's access to education and their participation in every field.
- Teachings stress an "essential harmony of science and religion" – the study of both science and religion are regarded as equally valuable lines of human inquiry.
- Baha'is must pray and study scriptures daily, but beyond this, are free to choose the form and style of their own meditation.
- Baha'is are not permitted, according to their religion, to engage in violent protest or in political campaigning.
- Financial contributions from Baha'i faithful to the 'administrative structure' are entirely voluntary. In all financial dealings, Baha'is must abide by the principles of honesty, fairness, ethics and 'work as service'.
- "We desire but the good of the world and the happiness of nations. These strifes and this bloodshed and discord must cease, and all men be as one kindred and family. Let not man glory in this that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind..." – From the Baha'i teachings.



A family photo: from left, Nasser Sedghi, Arash (Farhad's son), and Farhad, taken in Iran 35 years ago.

