

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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From businessman to 'spy': a Canadian-Iranian man's ordeal in Tehran's Evin Prison

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/businessman-spy-canadian-iranian-man-s-ordeal-tehran-s-evin-prison-2013-12-04>

"Your brother has passed away," a prison guard told Hamid and his world imploded.

Hamid Ghassemi-Shall, the Canadian-Iranian co-owner of a computer business had been held in Evin Prison in Tehran, Iran, for a year. His brother Alborz Ghassemi, a former mechanical engineer in the Iranian army was also there.

They had been sentenced to death, convicted in 2008 on spurious charges of espionage and cooperation with, the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), a political group proscribed in 1981. They had been held for months on end awaiting execution.

"You have to call your family to come and collect the body," the guards told Hamid.

Serious questions remain around the death of Alborz. The Iranian authorities claim he had been diagnosed with stomach cancer a few months earlier. However, when a coroner examined the body he reported a large head injury.

After his brother died, Hamid spent a further four years in the prison until he was eventually released and able to return to Toronto in September 2013.

However, the trauma of what happened during those five years is still very much alive.

"I hold Iran responsible for my brother's death, for the 64 months of my life that I spent in a prison, for the pain and suffering [my wife] Antonella, my sister, my mum, my brother and my sister-in-law went through. There's no excuse for that," Hamid said.

'A witch hunt'

Hamid's nightmare began in May 2008. He had travelled from Canada to Iran after his father passed away, to spend time with his mother, his brother Alborz and other siblings. He had been living in Toronto since leaving Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

But a few days after his arrival, Iranian security officials forced their way into his family's home, took their passports and arrested Alborz, who had remained in Iran the whole time.

When Hamid went to the Office of the Army Prosecutor to retrieve his passport and ask about his brother, he was arrested and taken to an army detention centre for questioning.

"They didn't tell me I had the right to see a lawyer. They handcuffed me, blindfolded me and took me to a cell. During the investigation the treatment was very bad. They beat me and tortured me psychologically for eight months," Hamid explained.

"This is a witch hunt. They need to arrest some people and they don't care if the person has done nothing. All they care about is reporting they have arrested people on this kind of charges."

For both men, interrogation sessions generally took place in a small room and would last anything between a few hours and a whole day. Interrogated separately, the two brothers later learned what the other endured: Hamid was seated in a metal chair with one hand handcuffed to a table leg. He was

questioned through a one-way mirror, unable to see those observing and taking part in his interrogation.

“I was there for hours, sometimes until midnight. They would ask me to answer the questions looking at my reflexion on the glass so I felt I was talking to myself. That makes you go crazy,” he told Amnesty International.

“They would ask me who I was in contact with, what kind of people, and what kind of information my brother had given me. They even asked me if I was having an affair.”

Hamid was accused of seeking sensitive information relating to Iran’s military, based on what he insisted was a falsified email to his brother Alborz, who was formerly a mechanical engineer in the army,

Eight months later, following what Amnesty International described at the time as an unfair trial by a Revolutionary Court, the brothers were convicted of *moharebeh* (enmity against God) for espionage and cooperation with the PMOI.

During successive trial sessions, the men were denied regular access to a lawyer of their choice; obtaining one only when the case was before the Supreme Court. The ‘evidence’ was a copy of an email seeking information on military matters, Amnesty International was told. The email address did not belong to Hamid Ghassemi-Shall. He implored the authorities to have the address checked, including by asking the firm, Yahoo for verification, but his request was ignored. Yet, the authorities had unfettered access to the men’s emails.

They were sentenced to death, and transferred to Tehran’s Evin Prison.

On several occasions, he was hours, if not minutes from being executed. One time, prison guards took him, blindfolded, dragged him up a flight of stairs and made him sit against a wall, alone. He thought that he would be killed. It was possibly a mock execution, intended to strike fear into him.

Later, at the end of February, 2011, Hamid’s sister contacted Antonella and said Hamid could be executed at any moment.

"It was unthinkable; unfathomable; such a chilling experience. It lead me to think that we were dealing with the unfathomable," Antonella told Amnesty International.

‘I didn’t know what was going on’

While the brothers, tried to cope with life in prison and the prospect of being executed, Hamid’s wife Antonella, who was at home in Canada, contacted Amnesty International and launched a global campaign for their release.

“I was in Canada and I didn't know what was going on. When I heard they had been arrested I knew it wasn’t good,” Antonella said.

“I felt I was a hostage, a prisoner. No matter what I did, I could be putting my husband in jeopardy. I didn't speak the language so I was lost in a complete dark hole.”

The campaign spearheaded by Antonella spread across Canada and later, the world, contributing to Hamid’s release. On 21 September 2013, Hamid was told he was going to be put on a plane back home.

He was one of possibly dozens of political prisoners who were released in Iran shortly after the Iran’s new President Hassan Rouhani took office.

When Antonella received a call from Hamid’s sister in Iran breaking the news, she could hardly believe it was true:

“To me, it was only real when he was standing in front of me at the airport in Canada. I could barely stand. I just wanted to hug him and feel that everything was ok.”

Hamid says he will never forget what happened and still struggles with the fact that he doesn't know how his brother died.

Despite decades of campaigning and appeals, the authorities have not, as far as Amnesty International is aware, brought to justice any official accused of wrongdoing. Impunity remains the rule in Iran today, under President Rouhani just as it was under previous administrations.

“All I want is an apology to my family. They didn't have evidence to keep me for a minute. And my brother passed away,” Hamid said.