

Escaping Kabul

Afghan Women's Cycling team escape Afghanistan

Report by Four Corners - Australian Broadcasting Commission, June 15 2026

This is the dramatic story of a secret effort to get members of a women's cycling community out of Afghanistan.



The Afghan cyclists who fled to pursue their Olympic dreams

In August 2021, the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan's capital Kabul after 20 years of war. Any hopes of emancipation for the Afghan people were abruptly dashed, giving way to a systemic crackdown. One of the first things they did was ban women from playing any sport, putting female athletes in danger.

Women and athletes became particular targets, accused of embodying "deviant" practices. Among them was the Afghan women's cycling team. Founded in 2010 and set to compete internationally, it found itself under threat. In a society governed by a strict interpretation of Islamic law, women's cycling was once again banned, considered a source of dishonour – with transgressions punishable by death.

Afghanistan's female cycling team knew they were in immediate danger. The Taliban considered the all-female athletes—as infidels who violated the Quran, because the clothes they wore to engage in sports allowed men to see the shape of their bodies.

But with the help of a former World Champion, an Israeli-Canadian philanthropist, five young women from the national cycling team managed to escape to a town in northern Italy. Some of them are now hoping to become the first cyclists to ever represent Afghanistan at the Olympics.

One of the young women, Reihana rode through waves of dust and dread, training her mind on the coming race instead of the nearing Taliban. Her drive to compete won out over fear. She finished the ride and went home to the house she shared with her parents, older brother, James, and little sister, Hania. She fell asleep in her room, surrounded by trophies, medals, and ribbons.

The next morning, her uncle called with a warning: The Taliban were coming.

“Take nothing—just run,” her uncle said. “If they find you, they will kill you!”

Reihana darted around her room, filling her arms with papers that identified her as an athlete. In the backyard, she lit them on fire and watched her identity burn. Years of dreams and victories vanished in a plume of smoke.

Her father gathered documents while her mother packed water and snacks. They would drive four hours to Kabul, where they could stay with family and try to catch a flight out of the country. Some of their treasured possessions—bicycles, snowboards, trophies—would identify them as infidels and put their lives in danger. Reihana’s heart ached to leave her bike. Would she ever see it again? There wasn’t much time to wonder.

Taking nothing more than a backpack each, the family of five piled into the car and sped towards the airport, past trucks full of Talib soldiers streaming in. Fighters dusty from battle rode in pairs on motorbikes, the passengers carrying rocket-propelled grenades slung over their shoulders.

Through the car window, she scanned her city for any sign of resistance. Where were the Afghan soldiers? Where were the police? As they drove past the police station, she saw that the Afghan flag, with its stripes of black and red and green, no longer flew over the building. In its place was the black-and-white Taliban flag. It is over, she thought. It is finished.

With formal evacuation routes closing, a group of international cycling officials, diplomats and humanitarian workers began building a high-risk escape plan for the girls across Afghanistan's borders. Unable to escape from the Kabul airport, humanitarians across the globe worked together to carry out this dramatic and complex operation, which brought the cyclists from Afghanistan to Europe via Tajikistan and Albania.

A regular public passenger bus was organised to transport the girls from Kabul to Mazar-e-Sharif in the north. Fake passports had been arranged through Italy, (because the Taliban were no longer issuing passports). The bus accommodated ordinary people as well as the athletes, to make it look like a regular transport bus. The plan was to cross the border and escape through Tajikistan. However, when they reached Mazar-e-Sharif, the group were detained and put into a holding house, but after a few days with the help of some bribery, they were released and told that they must return to Kabul.

The bus set off with its passengers making a direct line south towards Kabul, but once they believed they far enough away from Mazar-e-Sharif they made a direct turn to the west and headed for Turkmenistan, which they believed they could use as a transit country, before going on to Albania then Italy. The problem was, the passports were still at Mazar-e-Sharif. Taking a large sum of money to use as a bribe, one very brave individual drove back to Mazar-e-Sharif to retrieve the passports.

The problem was, officials at Turkmenistan only gave them a certain number of hours to be in their country. It was a race against time, but the brave individual turned up with the passports just in time. The passports however presented a problem because one official recognised them as being fake. Handing over another large sum of money, and trying to appeal to whatever human kindness there might have been in the official, it was explained that should these passengers return to Kabul they would be executed.

Miraculously the official allowed them to board a plane to Albania, and from Albania they flew to Italy. The five athlete girls were given a safe place to live – some in Canada and some in Switzerland. But they will never be able to see their families again. The girls have plans to compete in the next Olympics.

Questions

1. Who is the Taliban and when did they take over Afghanistan? (for you to research)
2. Why did the Taliban object to women cyclists?
3. How would you describe the women athletes in terms of character?
4. Why couldn't they escape the country by plane?
5. Who assisted the girls in the dramatic escape plan?
6. Outline the steps of the plan.
7. What went wrong?
8. How were the problems overcome?
9. Draw a map of their escape route. List all the countries involved in their escape.
10. Where are the girls living now and what are their plans for the future?

Persecution in Iran

Article 1

Report from Iranian Christians International

At Iranian Christians International (ICI), we regularly hear firsthand what persecution truly looks like – not from history books, but from the voices of believers who live it daily. In Iran, the Christian community is divided into two groups by the Islamic Theocratic Regime:

- Recognized: Those from historical Christian backgrounds (like Armenians and Assyrians), and
- Unrecognized: Those who are converts from Islam to Christianity-Muslim-born Iranians who leave Islam to follow Jesus.

These converts (the unrecognized group) are considered enemies of the state. The Iranian government views them not only as religious dissidents but as political threats – “Western agents,” “Israeli spies,” and “Christian Evangelical Zionists” seeking to destabilize Islam and the Islamic regime. Their “crime”? Apostasy – planting the seeds of discord among Muslims.

Every year, house church leaders and new believers are arrested, interrogated, and sentenced to long prison terms under accusations of “crimes against national security.” Some are exiled; others disappear quietly. Even family members often reject them. Meanwhile, Armenian and Assyrian Christians are permitted to exist, but only as second-class citizens. They are barred from sharing their faith in Persian (Farsi) and are forbidden from welcoming converts into their churches. Those who do risk heavy government punishment.

Kamyar’s Story

Kamyar, an Iranian Muslim convert to Christianity, is a husband and father of two. Quietly and faithfully, he pastored seven underground house churches across Iran.

Late one night at 11 p.m., his home was raided by Iranian intelligence agents. His charge? “Zionist Evangelical Christianity.” He was accused of undermining national security – a common label used to criminalize those who share the Gospel. Kamyar was immediately taken and placed in solitary confinement for 37 days. When he was finally released from isolation, he said, “I didn’t know how to relate to people anymore.” After his confinement, he was subjected to 30 terrifying interrogations, each lasting a minimum of four hours. The final outcome of the 600-page accusation was devastating: return to prison to await execution.

Through the efforts of lawyers, his sentence was reduced to 15 years in prison. When his family was finally able to secure temporary bail for a short visit, Kamyar fled escaping

through the mountains into Turkey, where he now lives in hiding with his family, seeking asylum.

Exiled Without a Trial

One of the dirtiest strategies used by the Islamists is to relentlessly pressure Christians in order to force them into self-exile. Through harassment, interrogation, financial extortion, and the constant threat of arrest, the regime makes everyday life intolerable for converts. They want Christians to flee the country quietly, forfeiting their bail and abandoning their homes, so the regime avoids international scrutiny while still crushing the underground church. It's persecution without the noise of violence, but with the same brutal outcome: displacement, fear, and broken families.

The Persecution Doesn't End at the Border

For Iranian Christians who flee to Turkey, like Kamyar, their suffering doesn't end. It simply takes a different shape. Turkey, though not as openly hostile as Iran, is still a Muslim-majority nation where converts from Islam face ongoing pressure, surveillance, and threats. Most live in legal limbo, often waiting many years for asylum in poor conditions, with limited to no access to jobs, healthcare, or education. Many are targeted by extremist groups, harassed by locals, or even monitored by Iranian agents operating across the border. They are not free to share their faith openly. And, while they may have escaped prison, they have not escaped fear. This is the reality for thousands of Iranian believers who have left everything for Christ only to find themselves vulnerable once again even outside of their birth country.

From One Oppressor to Another

In 2015, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) transferred the refugee screening and interview process in Turkey to the Turkish Immigration Office. This change had devastating consequences for people like Kamyar. Now, every Iranian convert seeking asylum in Turkey is interviewed not by a neutral UN official, but by a Turkish government employee – often a practicing Muslim. For an ex-Muslim, this means the person deciding your future sees you as a traitor, an unclean apostate, and an infidel.

These interviews are never fair. Many times, the Muslim interviewer tells the asylum seeker, "Christians have no problem living in Iran." The process is heavily biased, often discriminatory, and for most, ends in rejection. Even worse, the interpreters present during these interviews are frequently Iranian or Afghan Muslims – some with direct ties to the Iranian regime. These individuals are often strategically placed to gather sensitive information on Christian converts and report back to Tehran.

To help protect and defend these believers, ICI has hired multiple Turkish immigration lawyers to appeal denied cases. But, despite every effort, not one appeal has succeeded. These lawyers are part of the same compromised system. As a result, many of these

believers have been stranded, stuck, or forced to live illegally under the shadow of an Islamic government, without a way forward, and unable to return home.

Our Comfort Only Comes from His Word

In the face of all this suffering, only the words of Jesus bring lasting comfort. When you see the world through an eternal lens, everything changes:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Matthew 5:10-12

Let us stand with our persecuted brothers and sisters-because the only people they have is us.

It’s God’s family.

It’s you and I.

Written by Mohamad Faridi

<https://iranchristians.org/persecution-in-iran/>

Article 2

Middle East conflict

Barnabas Aid magazine July 2026

Iranian Christians face legal restrictions, close surveillance and constant weight of uncertainty. This is especially true for converts from Islam, even more than members of historic Christian communities. Farsi speaking, Muslim-background believers are treated with hostility, as apostates from Islam. They are criminalized as perceived threats to national security. Worship in Farsi has long been forbidden, and converts must meet in underground ‘house churches’ or in other discreet ways in order to avoid detection.

Many Christians are in prison where they face abuse and mistreatment. Because of ongoing war, Iranian Christians do not know what will happen from one day to the next, but they continue to demonstrate a remarkable resilient faith. House churches continue to meet; believers continue to serve those around them, demonstrating the love of Christ.

These followers of Jesus continue to risk their freedom, safety and security to share the Gospel and witness to those around them.

Questions

1. Why is the Iranian government opposed to Christians who have converted to Christianity?
2. What happens to these Christians when they are arrested?
3. How are the second group of Christians, (Armenians and Assyrians) treated?
4. Where do the Iranian Christian converts meet?
5. Briefly explain Kamyar's story.
6. Why does the Iranian government want Christian converts to flee the country?
7. What is the fate of Christian converts in Turkey?
8. How does the second article demonstrate the courage of Iranian Christian converts?

