

Yemen's Bahá'ís keep faith amid conflict, crackdown

by [Brian Pellot](#) in the [January 4, 2017](#) issue

For 11 days in August, Ruhiyeh Thabet al-Sakkaf and Nafheh Sanai al-Sakkaf shared a jacket and a damp cell at Yemen's National Security Bureau after armed officers stormed a multifaith youth event the sisters-in-law were leading and arrested 65 men, women, and children.

"They raided us how they would raid a terrorist cell, with masked gunmen shouting, 'Quiet! Sit down! Nobody move!'" Ruhiyeh said.

Ruhiyeh and Nafheh are members of the Bahá'í faith, which emphasizes spiritual unity and service. Previous Yemeni regimes have been suspicious of the few thousand Bahá'ís who live in the overwhelmingly Muslim country.

Now, with conflicts raging across the region, members of the minority faith are facing new levels of discrimination and persecution from the Houthis, a Shi'ite Muslim group that rose to prominence after seizing control of Yemen's northwest in 2014.

Ruhiyeh said that as a condition of their release, the young girls—most of them Muslim—who attended the event in early August were forced to sign pledges stating they would not communicate with Bahá'ís or engage in any Bahá'í-inspired social work.

Nafheh and Ruhiyeh signed similar pledges when they were released, with an added clause that they would only practice their religion at home.

"My faith is a pledge to God that I must serve my fellow citizens and my country," Ruhiyeh said she told a guard, to no avail.

Ruhiyeh's husband, Nadim al-Sakkaf, is the British Council's country manager in Yemen. He and his brother Nader, who is Nafheh's husband, were detained from August until their unexpected release in November. Their friend Keyvan Qadari remained in custody.

The three Bahá'í men faced charges of relaying information to Israel (where the international governing council of the Bahá'í faith is centered, and where a shrine to its leader, the Bahá'u'lláh, is based), converting people to the Bahá'í faith, and acting as spies for foreign countries.

The charges are serious but completely baseless, the accused men's wives said. International observers agree. Amnesty International called the men prisoners of conscience and wrote that they were arbitrarily detained.

Ruhiyeh recalls the agony of not being allowed to contact her children or the outside world in those first few days of imprisonment.

"We didn't know our husbands were in prison until our fourth day there when my sister-in-law went to bathroom and came back crying, saying she had seen my husband blindfolded and cuffed," Ruhiyeh said. "We thought they were outside at home with our children. We had not been allowed to call our family to tell them where we were."

Nafheh was released after 11 days to care for her young children. Ruhiyeh was released 16 days later after a heavy air strike disrupted operations at the National Security Bureau, where she was being detained. Sometime in the weeks thereafter the three men were moved to Sanaa's Political Security Office, where Qadari remains.

While in custody, Ruhiyeh's Excellence Foundation for Social Development was ransacked and the extended family's homes were raided.

Both women said the August 10 youth event, where Bahá'ís were a minority, focused on empowering youth to serve their communities.

"The whole training focused on education, peace, unity, and accepting everyone who lives in the country despite our different beliefs," Ruhiyeh said. "We wanted to encourage the youth not to leave, to invest their energies developing the country and bring prosperity in this difficult time the country is going through."

With their careers on hold—Ruhiyeh ended her work as a condition of her release and because of the raid on her foundation, and Nafheh's job as an English teacher was eliminated amid national insecurity—the women shifted to advocacy for the constitutionally guaranteed right to religious freedom. They met with the Houthi

religious and political group controlling much of the region.

“When we meet with National Security heads and the leadership of Ansar Allah, we don’t talk about religious minorities,” Ruhiyeh said. “We talk about citizens’ rights for all. We are Yemenis before we are Bahá’ís.”

The women have also met with Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

“The situation really is quite tied to their religious beliefs: all of these informal negotiations, the women being threatened, making pledges they should not be forced to make,” said Kristine Beckerle, Human Rights Watch’s Yemen and Kuwait researcher.

Ruhiyeh’s and Nafheh’s relentless advocacy over the past few months has often been met with threats to throw them back in jail.

“It’s so unpredictable—we don’t know what’s happening,” Ruhiyeh said. “I don’t know if we’ll be called in and arrested again. Every day, when I leave the house, I wear clothes to prepare myself for the fact that I could be arrested again at any second.” —Religion News Service

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