

Pastor films as masked federal agents arrest Iranian Christian asylum-seekers in LA

by [Fiona André](#)

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US Border Patrol agents detain two Iranian Christians, June 24, in Los Angeles.
(Video screengrabs via Ara Torosian)

Two Iranian Christian asylum-seekers were arrested by masked federal agents in Los Angeles on June 24, days after a wider sweep by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement targeting Iranian nationals in the US in the wake of the recent conflict between the US and Iran.

In a three-minute video clip captured by their pastor and posted on Instagram, a couple can be seen flanked by agents wearing vests emblazoned with “border patrol federal agents.” As the husband is arrested, the wife can be seen convulsing on the

ground in what the pastor, Ara Torosian, described as a panic attack.

The woman had called Torosian, hoping he might be able to intervene in the arrest, he said. The pastor told the agents the husband was an asylum-seeker as they carried out the arrest, to which one responded, “It doesn’t matter, sir, we’re just following orders, he’s got a warrant,” according to [the video footage](#).

A spokesperson for US Customs and Border Protection, which includes Border Patrol, said the couple had been flagged “as subjects of national security interest.”

“During a targeted enforcement operation in Los Angeles, Border Patrol agents apprehended two Iranian nationals unlawfully present in the US,” the CBP spokesperson said in a statement.

After her panic attack, immigration agents escorted the woman to Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center. They remained at the hospital to “guard the subject receiving medical care,” the CBP spokesperson wrote. The wife has since been discharged and both individuals are now in the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s Enforcement and Removal Operations, according to the CBP statement.

The pastor’s video clip, widely shared on social media, sparked outrage within Los Angeles’ Iranian community, home to nearly 600,000 Iranian Americans.

Torosian, an Iran-born pastor at Cornerstone Church West LA, said the scene shocked him and reminded him of his home country, which he fled in 2010.

“Seeing this masked man on the floor, with this woman, I got triggered. I said, ‘Where am I?’ in one moment. I said, ‘Where I am, in the street of Tehran or the street of Los Angeles?’” Torosian said in an interview.

Over the weekend, 11 Iranians were arrested by ICE across the country for confirmed or alleged ties with terrorist organizations, according to [a DHS statement](#). The arrests came after a brief conflict between Iran and the US and on the heels of the Israel-Iran war.

On June 13, Israel launched an air campaign on Iran targeting the country’s military and nuclear infrastructures. Iran launched hundreds of missiles into Israel in retaliation. On June 22, the US intervened in support of Israel by targeting Iran’s nuclear facilities. On June 24, Iran and Israel agreed to a ceasefire.

The arrests sparked angst in the Iranian-American community and have concerned advocates of Iranian Christians who've fled persecution from the Islamic regime.

In a statement, Jamal Abdi, president of the National Iranian American Council, denounced the U.S. detentions as "racial profiling and indiscriminate mass arrests of Iranians across the country, all under the guise of 'national security.'"

"Like many Iranian Americans, those arrested often came to the U.S. in search of opportunity and freedom from an authoritarian government. Now, their mere identity now appears to be grounds for arrest in the so-called 'land of the free,'" wrote Abdi in the statement.

Matthew Soerens, vice president of advocacy and policy at World Relief, an evangelical organization that resettles refugees, described the scene from the video as startling.

"Seeing individuals who fled persecution on account of their Christian faith be detained by masked officers over the desperate pleas of their pastor is something I never thought I'd see in the United States," he wrote in a statement.

According to Torosian, the couple, who have requested asylum, immigrated in 2024 through CBP One, a mobile app introduced during Joe Biden's presidency. Until its termination by President Donald Trump in January, the feature enabled immigrants to schedule asylum appointments at a port of entry.

In the video, one arresting agent tells Torosian that CBP One is "no longer valid anymore."

"That's why he's being arrested," another agent adds.

The couple are members of Cornerstone Church, a nondenominational church that offers services in English, Spanish and Farsi. They fled Iran to escape persecution due to their Christian faith, according to the pastor.

On June 23, two other members of Cornerstone Church, who had also applied for asylum, were arrested at North LA's Federal Building, where they were scheduled for an appointment. The day before, after the Sunday church service, the couple had told Torosian they were afraid to go to the appointment after hearing of arrests at immigration court hearings. They are now being detained at a South Texas Family Facility, said Torosian.

“As a pastor and a spiritual leader, one of my goals is to teach the Bible, a priority, and the same time, I’m asking them to be a good citizen,” said Torosian, who advised them to go.

The White House did not specifically comment on the couple’s arrest or the status of their asylum request when asked for comment.

“Any foreign citizen who fears persecution — including Iranians — are able to request asylum and have their claims adjudicated,” Abigail Jackson, spokesperson for the White House, said in a statement.

Open Doors International, an evangelical organization monitoring Christians’ persecution worldwide, in [a January report](#) ranked Iran in the top 10 countries to watch worldwide due to government oppression and persecution of Christians. The Iranian Islamic regime recognizes only two historic Christian communities, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, but those groups aren’t allowed to have contact with Muslim converts to Christianity and are treated as second-class citizens, according to the Open Doors report.

Muslim converts to Christianity are subjected to worse treatment, according to the report, including arrest, persecution and “long prison sentences for ‘crimes against national security.’”

“The government sees these Iranian Christians as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran,” states the report.

An estimated 4 million Iranian Christians are in exile, the majority of whom live in Turkey.

“Americans, and especially American evangelicals like me, need to wake up to the startling reality that a significant share of those being detained and threatened with deportation have no criminal conviction whatsoever and have been lawfully present right up until the administration abruptly illegalized them as they pursue deportation quotas,” wrote World Relief’s Soerens in his statement.

If passed, the Trump administration’s new tax and spending bill would allocate more funding to immigration enforcement, argues Soerens, and potentially increase similar arrests, including that of “fellow Christians who fear persecution or even martyrdom if deported.” On June 26, [the White House announced](#) it hoped Congress

would pass the bill by this week.

Following last week's arrests, the church's leadership advised attendees not to come on Sunday as they fear the church will be raided. The congregation created a fund to cover the rent for the two couples for this month.

"America gave us freedom here, but unfortunately, I had to tell my people not to come to church, which is shocking. In Iran, we hide ourselves, and they close our buildings. Now in America, because I'm afraid and I have to protect my people, I'm saying, 'Guys, don't come to the church,'" said Torosian. —Religion News Service

Jack Jenkins contributed to reporting.