

Bonner Querschnitte

Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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Young woman promotes discussion about religious freedom

Honor for Iranian civil rights activist and convert Mary Mohammadi

(Bonn, 05.05.2023) For her “outstanding courage” and “extraordinary selflessness”, Iranian civil rights activist Mary Mohammadi was awarded this year’s St. Stephen’s Award for Persecuted Christians at a ceremony in Bonn on April 22, 2023.

The 24-year-old has not only personally claimed the right to change her faith in Iran, where turning away from Islam is considered a crime. She has also gathered and published information about the persecution of dissidents by the totalitarian dictatorship, including the inhumane treatment of prisoners in Qarchak and Fashafoye prisons. She was arrested several times and imprisoned twice for extended periods, most recently in 2020, when the U.S. government at the time advocated for her in public speeches or interviews.



(from left): The chairwoman of the Stephanus Foundation, Michaela Koller, with Daniela Städter (IDEA editorial director) and the General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, Prof. Thomas Schirmacher, during the award ceremony with Mary Mohammadi, who was broadcast live from the USA © BQ/IGFM

Laudator Michael Brand, human rights policy spokesman for the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the German Bundestag, described the laureate’s commitment to her faith and to human rights as “incredible” and “heroic” and what she suffered, including imprisonment, torture and mistreatment, as “martyrdom”. He had followed her fate as a political godfather and campaigned for her release.

“But no one could break this courageous young woman deeply rooted in her faith. The example spread like wildfire”, Brand said. Around the world, her case caused a stir

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and ultimately spurred discussion about what religious freedom—the right to choose to profess one’s faith—means.

Courageous like Stephen

Mohammadi confessed that she had researched religions and worldviews of other peoples at the age of 17 and has since considered Jesus Christ the most outstanding figure in world history. It was difficult to get hold of a Bible in Persian in Iran because it was forbidden to possess it. While reading it, she had already asked herself whether she could be as courageous as the deacon of the early Christian community, Stephen. She could not have known what turn her life would take and that one day she would even receive a prize bearing his name. Stephen was the first martyr to be stoned to death for confessing Jesus Christ.

She said the award encourages her to continue to stand up for human rights and the oppressed. “I dedicate the Stephanus Award to all unknown persecuted women who continue to fight for their cause without support.” She encouraged all those who stand up for the persecuted to appeal to those in power in dictatorships and to call in their democratic governments to demand, for example, the release of prisoners for political or religious reasons. “They definitely experience this support in prison”, she stressed.



Thomas Schirmmacher during his speech © BQ/IGFM

Professor Thomas Schirmmacher, General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance and President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights, showed in his speech that the right to religious freedom is, from its historical origin, a right to change one’s faith. Conversion or joining a religious community is ultimately impossible to control or even prevent, as the example of Iran shows. People are characterized by the need to represent their convictions to their fellow human beings, to defend them or, if necessary, to change them. The ban on changing one’s faith ultimately means not allowing one’s own children to follow a different path than their parents.

Foundation Chairwoman Michaela Koller warned against soon forgetting the heroism of the revolting women in Iran and such civil rights activists as Mohammadi. The freedom that citizens enjoy in constitutional states was also once fought for with sacrifices. Pioneers of freedom and justice deliberately took a high personal risk. For the sake of a better future, they should be supported by the people who live in democracies.

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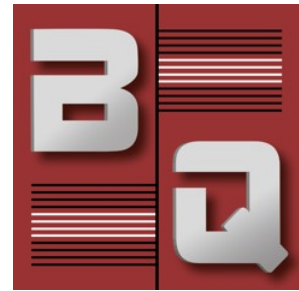
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On the fate of the laureate

After the shoot-down of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 by an Iranian anti-aircraft missile, which those responsible denied for three days, Mohammadi, like thousands of others, demonstrated against the mullah dictatorship on January 12, 2020. Security forces brutally attacked her in Tehran's Azadi Square, arresting her, abusing and sexually humiliating her. She was held in notorious dungeons of Tehran's terror regime.

At the age of 19, she was arrested for the first time after converting from Islam to Christianity at a house church meeting and imprisoned in the notorious Evin Prison from November 2017 to May 2018. On February 27, 2020, she was released on bail—but she was not yet out of danger. She faced a long prison sentence for “disturbing public order”. On February 21, 2022, she managed to leave the country for the USA.

About the award and the foundation

The Stephen Award has been presented annually since 2006. Honorees include Hong Kong's former Catholic chief pastor, Cardinal Joseph Zen, who was recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize; Pakistani human rights lawyer Aneeqa Anthony; Jesuit Father Frans van der Lugt from Homs, Syria, who was murdered by radical Islamic militants a year after receiving the award; and award-winning Christian actress Demyana Nassar from Egypt. The Frankfurt-based organization helps discriminated as well as persecuted Christians with grants for their defense or education and draws attention to violations of religious freedom.



The Chairwoman of the Stephanus Foundation, Michaela Koller, during her speech © BQ/IGFM

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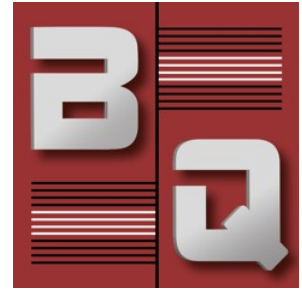
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- **Photo 1** (from left): The chairwoman of the Stephanus Foundation, Michaela Koller, with Daniela Städter (IDEA editorial director) and the General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, Prof. Thomas Schirmmacher, during the award ceremony with Mary Mohammadi, who was broadcast live from the USA © BQ/IGFM
- **Photo 2**: Photo of the certificate for Mary Mohammadi © BQ/IGFM
- **Photo 3**: Mary Mohammadi live from the U.S. during the awards ceremony © BQ/IGFM
- **Photo 4** and **photo 5**: Thomas Schirmmacher during his speech © BQ/IGFM
- **Photo 6**: The Chairwoman of the Stephanus Foundation, Michaela Koller, during her speech © BQ/IGFM
- Stephanus Award 2023: Honor for persecuted Christian Iranian woman: <https://stephanus-stiftung.org/stephanuspreis-2023-ehrung-fuer-verfolgte-christliche-iranerin/>
- idea press release “Courageous for Christ”: <https://app.idea.de/html5/epaper/YXJf4LEslicl6/article/1b0bd96ccc524934a6e905fd82906aa5>

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