

The Saga of Banin Qataya...

Shia-Christian Religious Consortium Violates Human Rights with State's Blessin

Ms. Banin Qataya's three-year struggle for personal and religious freedom has ended in vain, at the hands of the region's leading Christian and Shia religious figures. Unsurprisingly, Lebanon's "official" representatives remained conspicuously absent.

Qataya's story began when the then-21-year-old decided to convert to Christianity from Shia Islam. In early May 2012, she chose to leave her parents' home in the village of Nabha. According to Father Semaan Atallah, the Archbishop of Baalbeck-Deir El-Ahmar (Maronite), Banin² sought escape from the physical and psychological abuse she was receiving from her father because of her conversion.¹ After her departure, rumors circulated throughout the community that Banin had been abducted by Christian priests and soon enough, that hearsay resulted in the kidnapping of Maronite Father Walid Gharious, who is believed to have baptized Banin in the church of Our Lady of Beshwat on May 7. Fortunately, he was returned the same day to Sheikh Mohammad Yazbeck, head of Hezbollah's Shura Council.³

Once Banin left home, Sheikh Ahmad Qataya—her father—made headlines by accusing Bekaa's Christian clergy of leveraging his daughter's "case" to compromise the "honor of the Shia community." In addition, Qataya denounced the clergy for having concocted an enterprise aimed at "trying to convert all Shia kids in Baalbeck" and using "witchcraft and sorcery" to compel his daughter's conversion.⁴ In an interview with LBC television, Qataya also threatened to retrieve his daughter

from her "captors" at all costs, even at the expense of igniting a civil war!⁵

Banin was handed over to Sheikh Mohammad Yazbeck on the evening of May 14 in a choreographed exchange with Archbishop Atallah. Sheikh Yazbeck is both a senior Hezbollah cleric and Lebanese religious representative for Iran's Supreme leader Sayyed Ali Khamenei. The conditions of her return included that she would not be pressured to convert back to Islam.⁶ Following her return, Banin explained in an LBC television interview, "I started believing [in Christianity] six years ago, and I was baptized three years ago. I left my parents' house willingly; I was not kidnapped... I left so that I could practice my faith with greater freedom." She concluded by saying, "Now I'm back, and that's the end of the story."⁷

But is that really the final chapter in her saga? Although Banin may have been returned to her family, the circumstances demonstrate a clear violation of her human rights. The situation is an example of a young woman who was deprived of her right to practice, free of persecution and scrutiny, the religion of her choosing. Although her return included the guarantee that she would not be forced to adopt Shia Islam, it remains

unclear whether Banin's family and community will actually allow her to exercise her religious beliefs freely. By extension, the situation is particularly troublesome when one considers that she is 24 years old. At that age, Banin should certainly be capable of making her own choices in life, whether or not they run counter to the wishes of her elders.

Hezbollah has proven yet again that its authority eclipses the state's and that it can exert control not only over the Bekaa's Shia population, but over all other religious and sectarian groups as well.



Sheikh Mohammad Yazbek, the Lebanese religious representative for Iranian leader Sayyed Ali Khamenai, and Archbishop Semaan Atallah brokered the exchanges of both kidnapped Father Walid Gharious and Banin Qataya, the 24 year old Christian convert who left her family's house in search of greater religious freedom. Sheikh Yazbek, a senior Hezbollah official and Banin's grandfather, promised that the young woman would not be forced to convert back to Islam despite accusations by her father that Father Gharious used sorcery to convince her to convert in the first place.

In general, the coordination that occurred between the area's Shia and Christian leaders on Banin's behalf is unsettling. Both sides worked in unison to hand over—literally—a human being to the same people who had abused her mentally and physically. Rather than offering her protection and counseling and helping her assert her inalienable human rights, those involved used their authority to calm the fears of the community.

Ultimately, Banin's tale underscores the inability or unwillingness of the Lebanese government to discharge its responsibility by protecting its citizens. Indeed, Banin's return, like that of Father Gharious, was brokered by Hezbollah; the Lebanese authorities remained notably absent from the process. Of course, it is



The Our Lady of Bechwat church, where Banin is believed to have been baptized, has been a pilgrimage site for local Christians since 2004, when it was said that the church's statue of the Virgin Mary shed oil and a number of miracles were performed. These miracles also coincided with a tumultuous year in Lebanese politics; 2004 was the beginning of serious criticism of Rafiq Hariri after his bloc voted in favor of extending the presidency of Emile Lahoud beyond constitutional limits, and the United Nations began pushing Resolution 1559, which calls for fair elections in Lebanon and the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country.

possible that the State chose not to become involved in the case given the Qataya family's connections to Hezbollah. Specifically, as Sheikh Ahmad Qataya is the son-in-law of Sheikh Muhammad Yazbeck, the familial connection not only cements his affiliation with Hezbollah, but also ties him intimately to that organization. Nevertheless, Hezbollah has proven yet again that its authority eclipses the state's, and that it can exert control over the Bekaa's Shia population and other religious communities, as well. Above all, it is more than apparent that Hezbollah can determine the degree of freedom it will accord to an entire community.

Banin's story may have reached its end, for now, but the struggle for human and individual rights in Lebanon continues...

¹ "Baalbek Archbishop Hands Muslim Girl who Converted to Christianity Back to Her Family." *Naharnet*. 14 May 2012. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/40168>

² "Baalbek Priest Kidnapped after 'Baptizing Muslim Girl'." *Naharnet*. 7 May 2012. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/39451>

³ "Abducted Priest Handed Over to Hezbollah Official." *The Daily Star*. May 2012. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/May-08172657-/abducted-priest-handed-over-to-hezbollah-official.ashx#axzz1vru96MbH>

⁴ "Kidnapped Priest Accused of Sorcery." *Now Lebanon*. 11 May 2012. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/BlogDetails.aspx?TID=2385&FID=6> "Father of baptized Muslim girl accuses priest of practicing sorcery on her." *Now Lebanon*. 11 May 2012. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/arabic/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=394889>

⁵ "Baalbek Archbishop Hands Muslim Girl who Converted to Christianity Back to Her Family." *Naharnet*. 14 May 2012. <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/40168>

⁶ "Convert Placed Under Protection of Hezbollah." *The Daily Star*. 15 May 2012. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/May-15173417-/convert-placed-under-protection-of-hezbollah.ashx#axzz1vru96MbH>

⁷ "Banin Kataya's return to her parental home." *Youtube*. 14 May 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=279NhdKrr-E>