

# Bahá'í International Community

United Nations Office | GENEVA

Route des Morillons 15, CH-1218 Grand-Saconnex / Geneva, Switzerland

Tel: +41 (0)22 798 5400 Fax: +41 (0)22 798 6577 E-mail:

geneva@bic.org

## Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran with regard to discrimination denying access to employment and higher education

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We submit the following information about the situation of the Bahá'ís in the Islamic Republic of Iran as concerns the International Labour Organization's Convention 111 on Discrimination. To our knowledge, no other ILO Conventions pertain to human rights abuses that specifically target members of the Bahá'í community with regard to issues under the organization's mandate.<sup>1</sup>

We recall in this context that Article 1 of ILO Convention 111 defines discrimination as "any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin, which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation." In addition, it stipulates that "the terms employment and occupation include access to vocational training, access to employment and to particular occupations, and terms and conditions of employment."

### ***Introduction***

For more than three decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has waged a widespread and systematic campaign of persecution against the country's Bahá'í religious minority. Since 1979, more than 200 Bahá'ís have been executed, hundreds more imprisoned and tortured, tens of thousands denied employment, education, freedom of worship, and other rights — all solely because their religion is declared to be a "heretical sect."

The persecution of Bahá'ís has continued unabated: since 2005, more than 700 Bahá'ís have been arrested and, as of June 2015, at least 117 Bahá'ís were languishing in prison. Overall, in the decade between 2005 and 2015, there has been a continuation of the government's official policy of discrimination and persecution against Bahá'ís, marked by revolving door arrests, the denial of access to higher education, and a government campaign of anti-Bahá'í propaganda in the media. Government actions have been accompanied by numerous attacks by anonymous individuals on Bahá'ís and their properties, including arson attacks, anti-Bahá'í graffiti, and the desecration of Bahá'í cemeteries.

The economic suffocation of the Bahá'í community has been systematic and wide-ranging, and has been the result of the government's effort to block Bahá'ís from earning a decent

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the persecution against Iran's Bahá'ís includes recurrent violations of a wide range of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. Recent developments are regularly reported online at: <http://news.bahai.org/human-rights/iran/iran-update/>, and additional information can also be found at: <https://www.bic.org/what-we-do/27>. For in-depth background and photos, the 2008 edition of *The Bahá'í Question – Cultural Cleansing in Iran* can be downloaded at: <http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/TheBahaiQuestion.pdf> or obtained in a bound edition from Bahá'í International Community representatives.

livelihood for themselves and their families. Since the 1979 Revolution, Bahá'ís were banned from all public sector jobs, from any government employment, including in education, health care, or government institutions. Bahá'í-owned factories and shops were closed or confiscated, and efforts were made to persuade Muslim-owned businesses in the private sector to fire their Bahá'í employees. By one estimate, more than 10,000 Bahá'ís lost their jobs, pensions or property in this policy.

Since 2005, at least 650 incidents of economic persecution against Iranian Bahá'ís have been documented by the Bahá'í International Community. This figure is undoubtedly higher, given the difficulty of getting accurate information about human rights violations from Iran. This report focuses on recent aspects of this continuing policy aimed at closing those few avenues for economic livelihood that remain open to Bahá'ís, which has caused numerous incidents of shop closings, dismissals, the actual or threatened revocation of business licenses, and other efforts to suppress the economic activity of Bahá'ís. It covers events occurring over the past year, through 2015, when, despite promises to the contrary, the economic pressures facing Bahá'ís have not abated and the barriers erected towards their free and unfettered engagement in the economic life of the nation have not been removed. We will not be providing here the names of victims of human rights abuses, for their own security, but all cases mentioned in this report have been fully documented in submissions to the relevant UN Special Procedures and agencies.

A key element of this overall economic suppression has been the effort to deny young Bahá'ís access to higher education. Thousands of young Bahá'ís have year after year been prevented from attending university or college in Iran. When the Bahá'í community created its own, ad hoc Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE) to respond to the educational needs of young Bahá'ís, the government repeatedly sought to shut it down with raids and arrests. In 2011, for example, 17 volunteer teachers and administrators of the BIHE were arrested and sentenced to prison terms ranging from four to five years.

The government has, moreover, fueled hatred against Bahá'ís through a relentless campaign in the media. Attacks on Bahá'í businesses have come amid a government-sponsored campaign to incite hatred against Bahá'ís, marked by numerous anti-Bahá'í articles or broadcasts in state-run or state-affiliated media. In the period from January 2014 to May 2015, more than 6,000 individual anti-Bahá'í articles, videos or webpages were disseminated in official or semi-official media in Iran<sup>2</sup>. Over the course of one month two Friday Prayer Leaders in Rafsanjan and Kerman made remarks against the Bahá'í Faith, in an effort to incite hatred within the population. This campaign, also, has remained unabated and in many ways grown since the election of President Rouhani. From January 2014 through May 2015, for example, more than 6,300 articles, videos, or web-pages featuring anti-Bahá'í propaganda appeared in government-controlled or government-sponsored media.

Bahá'ís are non-violent and non-partisan, and pose no threat to the government. Their only wish – besides being able to practice their religion freely – is to contribute to the development and prosperity of their country. This insidious exclusion of Bahá'ís from the economic life of the nation extends to all levels of the country's economic structure and is embedded in the government's policy by the 1991 memorandum signed by Supreme

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<sup>2</sup> This campaign was documented by the Bahá'í International Community in a report released in October 2011. Titled *Inciting Hatred: Iran's media campaign to demonize Bahá'ís*, it offered a sampling of the official and semi-official anti-Bahá'í propaganda issued during a 16-month period from late 2009 through mid-2011, documenting more than 400 articles, broadcasts, or Web pages that falsely portrayed Bahá'ís as the source of every conceivable evil.

Leader Ali Khamenei that outlines a series of repressive measures to be taken against Bahá'ís to "block" their development, including restrictions on education and economic activity, such as: "Deny them employment if they identify themselves as Bahá'ís." Its provisions, still in effect today, also include instructions that students "be expelled from universities either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís."

These instructions have been implemented ever since, throughout the country. Tens of thousands of Bahá'ís have been deprived of jobs, pensions, business and educational opportunities. A truth that we are documenting in this report, but that is systematically denied by the representatives of the Iranian government at the ILO. As you will surely recall, in its latest report (2015), the ILO Committee of Experts noted "that the situation of non-recognized religious minorities, in particular the Bahá'ís, remains sensitive, including the societal attitude towards members of this group".<sup>3</sup>

### ***Denial of employment, pensions and other benefits***

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran ensures "conditions and opportunities of employment for everyone" and, in Article 43 regarding the economy, prohibits "the infliction of harm and loss upon others". However, in thousands of cases, officials have taken measures to make it impossible for those who are known to be Bahá'ís to earn a living.

Official documents prove that these abuses are government policy. In particular, a letter from the Public Places Supervision Office (dated 9 April 2007) ordered commanders of police and heads of intelligence and security to prevent members of the "perverse Bahai sect" (as well as members of "anti-revolutionary political organizations" and other illegal groups) from engaging in certain occupations. The orders stipulated that Bahá'ís must be denied work permits and licences for over 25 kinds of business, specifically listed, and barred from all other "high-earning businesses".<sup>4</sup> The 25 trades included many independent businesses and shops that Bahá'ís have opened over the years throughout Iran because this was the only way they could earn a living. Members of the community have long been banned from employment in the public sector, and many have been refused or fired from private sector jobs once their religious affiliation became known.

A wide range of measures are being used to discriminate against Bahá'ís. In 2006 trade associations, unions and business organizations had been instructed to compile lists of Bahá'ís in every type of employment. Identification was followed by action, involving an untold number of officials who:

- refused to issue or renew business licenses, work permits and/or trade membership cards to Bahá'ís.
- issued instructions to chain stores, government offices and other organizations to avoid purchasing from or to stop all business dealings with companies and independents

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<sup>3</sup> The full text is available at: [http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/P/09661/09661\(2015-104-1A\).pdf](http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/P/09661/09661(2015-104-1A).pdf)

<sup>4</sup> A copy of this 2007 letter (in Persian original and English translation) is on pages 86-87 of Bahá'í International Community, The Bahá'í Question – Cultural Cleansing in Iran, September 2008, (pgs 86-87) available at <http://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/pdf/TheBahaiQuestion.pdf>

- because the owners or managers were Bahá'ís
- incited the population to shun Bahá'í-owned businesses
- instructed landlords of stores to refuse lease renewals to Bahá'í tenant shopkeepers
- banned Bahá'ís who were working independently from continuing their activities
- warned private-sector employers against hiring members of the community and/or harassed them to dismiss Bahá'í employees, threatening them with closure of their business if they did not do so (some were shut down; others banned from advertising, etc.)
- conducted unexpected inspection visits to workplaces, summoning and interrogating Bahá'ís, or raiding and even vandalizing some Bahá'í-owned stores
- closed many Bahá'í-owned businesses, sealing the premises.

Bahá'ís continue to be dismissed from all public sector jobs, and banned from any government employment, including in education, health care, or government institutions. Bahá'í-owned factories and shops were closed or confiscated, and efforts are made to persuade Muslim-owned businesses in the private sector to fire their Bahá'í employees. As a result, more than 10,000 Bahá'ís lost their jobs, pensions or property, and since 2005, at least 650 incidents of economic persecution against Iranian Bahá'ís have been documented by the Bahá'í International Community.

In addition, banks have refused to proceed with loan approvals for and/or frozen the assets in accounts belonging to Bahá'ís. Business licenses and banking services are vital – as mentioned above, many Bahá'ís launched private enterprises over the years because they and other members of the community could not obtain employment in Iran. Some of those deprived of their rightfully earned pensions attempted to pursue legal remedies, but the courts systematically ruled against them. Copies of court decisions in such cases explicitly state: “payment of pension to those individuals connected with the Bahá'í sect is illegal” [or an “unlawful act”].

Bahá'í farmers are also affected. Agricultural land owned by members of the community has been confiscated. In April 2010, for example, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards confiscated 5,000 square meters of land in Ghaemshahr that belonged to a Bahá'í and should have been inherited by his family; the confiscation was applied while his heirs were farming the land (Bahá'ís are systematically denied the right to inheritance). There have also been targeted attacks, with trees uprooted in Bahá'í-owned orchards, crops destroyed and Bahá'í farms forced to shut down.

Since our last report, Iranian authorities have greatly intensified their discriminatory policies and practices to deny members of the Bahá'í community the right to work and earn a decent living. Authorities throughout the country continue to use harassment, intimidation and false accusations to shut down or impede the activities of tens of Bahá'í-owned businesses. The homes and work places of Bahá'ís are frequently searched and raided, and their owners summoned and interrogated. The following represents only those cases that have been reported to us since August 2014:

- In the early hours of 11 August 2014, in Tehran officials of the Ministry of Intelligence raided the place of business of two Bahá'ís and arrested the two men together with their four employees, one of whom is not a Bahá'í and was released in the afternoon of the same day. The officials confiscated their computers and other electronic devices and took a large amount of goods and products from their shop.
- On 2 August 2014, a Bahá'í who had moved from Shiraz to Karaj since a year and a half, received a telephone call from the Intelligence Office of Shiraz and was summoned to that office for an employment-related interrogation. When he told the agent that he lives

in Karaj, the agent asked in a harsh tone of voice “Why did you not inform us?” and began questioning him in detail about his job. He was also asked to provide his exact home address. He was then told that the Intelligence Office of Karaj would be sure to follow up the issue.

- Some of the Bahá’í business owners and truck operators in Ghaemshahr were summoned and asked questions concerning their personal lives and the Bahá’í community. They were also asked for copies of their family members’ identification papers.
- The pressures imposed on the Bahá’í farmers were more than doubled in September 2014 in Semnan. The agents of the Revolutionary guards prevented the land-owners from traveling or even providing food for the local workers. The Revolutionary guards are actively preventing the harvesting of crops, which are on the verge of rotting. This had happened for many years and had resulted in the loss of a large amount of produce, some of which was harvested through the continuous persistence of the owners. In response to a protest from one of the owners who wanted to enter his fields, one of the agents said, “The apples of this orchard are sent to Israel. We will leave here after the crop is finished [when the harvest time is over].” All the evidence indicates that the Revolutionary Guards are determined to confiscate the farm land and turn it to a military area.
- A Bahá’í in Tabriz was threatened by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence and expelled from his occupation.
- In January 2015, four Bahá’í opticians in Marvdasht, two shopkeepers from Kashan, and one shopkeeper from Aligoudarz, were summoned for interrogation to the Public Places Supervision Office (Amaken)<sup>5</sup>, responsible for the enforcement of accepted moral codes in places of work and other offices.
- On 17 November 2014, agents of the Ministry of Intelligence in Rasht went to the homes of four Bahá’ís and confiscated all the usual items, after which they went to their work places and, after conducting a search, took computers and other usual items. So far five non-Bahá’í friends of these individuals have been summoned, interrogated and threatened by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence and made to confess to being taught the Bahá’í Faith. The agents also forced them to sign a pledge not to associate with Bahá’ís.
- In December 2014 in Isfahan, the home of the father of a Bahá’í student (whose architectural design won first prize in a competition) was raided and his place of work was sealed. It was clear from what was said to his parents during the search that the agents were aware of the student’s academic achievements and his success in the prestigious competition.
- On 19 January 2015, agents visited homes and work places of five Bahá’ís in Shiraz and obtained undertakings from them to report for questioning were they to be summoned.
- In June 2015, agents of the Ministry of Intelligence and Public Places Supervision Office in Arak and Aligoudarz, have summoned the Bahá’í shop owners and questioned them about the Bahá’í Holy Days and the expiration dates of their business licences.

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<sup>5</sup> The Public Places Supervision Office (Amáken) is reportedly responsible for the enforcement of accepted moral codes in places of work and other offices.

In the recent months, Iranian authorities have intensified their discriminatory policies and practices towards members of the Bahá'í faith through different measures of economic disruption. In many cities, the authorities sealed Bahá'í-owned shops giving spurious reasons for doing so. Bahá'ís have been dismissed from their occupations and their shops have been sealed by the authorities:

- On 8 April 2014, the optical shop of a Bahá'í in Semnan was sealed. The same incident has occurred to the drapery factory and the lens grinding workshop of other two Bahá'ís in Semnan. The Financial Crimes Department had fined him 100 million tuman (approximately US\$39,000); however, after consulting with an attorney, he decided not to pay the fine and file a complaint instead. The local office of the Ministry of Intelligence of the city of Semnan placed his equipment on sale and sold it to an unknown person for the amount of 86 million tuman (US\$33,000).
- It was reported in mid-March that recently the expired licenses of some of the optical shops of the Bahá'ís in Tabriz had not been renewed, on the grounds of "market saturation". However, non-Bahá'í individuals in the same location experienced no difficulties renewing their business licenses. These Bahá'ís filed complaints with the public prosecutor's office in Eastern Azerbaijan. In turn, the prosecutor asked the Intelligence and security office of the province to expedite the investigation of this matter; but no response has yet been received. A Bahá'í resident of Tabriz, who has been working as an optician for over 22 years, visited the relevant bureau to renew his business license sometime between 11 January and 20 January 2014; but the renewal was denied by the officials and an order was issued to close his shop. It is understood that "market saturation" has only been used in the cases of Bahá'ís and it means that the government has disallowed Bahá'ís in some cities to engage in certain types of business on the grounds that too many Bahá'ís are engaged in that profession.
- One of the opticians in Tabriz whose shops had been closed began working at his Muslim friend's shop. On 12 February 2014, the friend was summoned to the Public Places Supervision Office and warned that if he was to continue to employ his Bahá'í friend his shop was going to be closed down. The Bahá'í left his job in order not to cause any problems for his friend.
- 16 shops belonging to Bahá'ís were closed down in the city of Tonekabon by the Public Places Supervision Office in November 2013. When these Bahá'ís visited the Department of Commerce and the Public Places Supervision Office, each office blamed the other and denied responsibility for this act. One of these officials informed a Bahá'í that the authorities were planning on closing down all the Bahá'í shops in the city. None of the shops had had any problem with the union. Some of the shops were closed down just within an hour after the warning about the closure was received. Some of the owners were asked to sign an agreement not to close their places of business without coordination with the appropriate unions.
- The economic pressure on the Bahá'ís of Hamadan has been increasing in the recent months. In mid-February 2014, officials in the city of Hamadan began summarily closing all Bahá'í-owned shops in the city and warned their friends and colleagues not hire the Bahá'ís. We believe that the aim of this pressure is to force Bahá'ís to leave the city. Following are a number of examples of the harassment members of the Bahá'í community face:
  - On 16 November 2012, government authorities sealed all the Bahá'í shops in Hamadan province for "propagating" the Bahá'í Faith. A Bahá'í from Hamadan

whose heavy-duty motor repair shop had been closed by the authorities began working at a shop leased by one of his former apprentices. In November 2013, individuals from the Public Places Supervision Office visited this shop. The officer from the Public Places Supervision Office asked about the number of people working at the shop and inquired about the work of the Bahá'í who was working for him. The agents then said that the Bahá'í has been under surveillance and thus it is known that he is working at the shop fulltime. The shop was then closed on 25 November 2013.

- A Bahá'í began working as a hairdresser in her own home for friends and clients after the optical shop of her husband was closed down by the Ministry of Intelligence. She was forced to stop her work following threats and warnings by the Ministry of Intelligence.
- A Bahá'í and his father owned an automotive workshop. When their shop was closed down, the Bahá'í began working in front of the shop for some time and then in his friends' shops. His car was seized and his friends and colleagues were threatened against employing him. He was also summoned to the local headquarters of the Ministry of Intelligence and threatened.
- A Bahá'í taught in an academy once a week. The director was warned that if she was to continue working there, the academy would be closed down entirely. Initially, the director did not give in to the requests as the Bahá'í was highly regarded, but was subsequently forced to dismiss her due to the continued threats from officials to close down the institute.
- During a Bahá'í holy day, agents of the Ministry of Intelligence went to the shops of Bahá'ís that had been previously sealed and began videotaping them and inquired from the neighbors how the Bahá'ís were making a living. Neighbors of the Bahá'í shop owners had given them permission to use their shops after their shops were sealed. This was the case with two Bahá'ís. There neighbors were warned by an agent of the Ministry of Intelligence against cooperating with the Bahá'ís.
- On 31 May 2014, the Public Places Supervision Office visited two shops owned by Bahá'ís in Agh-Ghala, Gorgan. The two shops had been closed for a Bahá'í holy day commemorating the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, their business licences were taken and the Bahá'ís were threatened with closure of their shops.
- On 28 May 2014, authorities in Isfahan visited more than ten shops owned by Bahá'ís in Isfahan and threatened to seal them if they closed their shops during Bahá'í holy days.
- On 13 July 2014, in Ghaem Shahr a business which employed 20 people was closed by the Public Places Supervision Office, despite the fact that the owner (a Bahá'í) had a business license to distribute food and hygiene supplies.
- In September 2014, a Bahá'í from Yazd went to the local police station to submit the forms he had completed for his business license. He noticed that despite his having specified his religion as "Bahá'í" on the form, the authorities had changed his religion to Jewish. When he informed them of this mistake, they changed the wording to "Perverse sect of Bahaiism". After many visits, enquiries, and discussions with various officials, he was eventually told to fill out some security forms and to bring with him his National Identification Number, and other personal details of all the members of his family. When the Bahá'í arrived at the Office of Amaken, he was interrogated in a closed room. They

asked him about his son, who was serving a three-year prison sentence, and about his wife, who had previously been sentenced to one year's imprisonment and one year's suspended imprisonment, after which they remarked, "Your case is rather difficult because of your wife and your son". Eventually, on 6 September 2014, the Bahá'í received a notification from the Office of Amaken with orders for his workshop to be sealed after 15 days. It should be noted that security officials also interrogated his employees and, as they also were Bahá'ís, they were asked to go to the Security Office fill out forms. The authorities recorded the National Identification Numbers, and mobile telephone numbers of the Bahá'í employees, as well as those of all their family members.

On 25 October 2014, agents of the Amaken in Kerman sealed 80 shops of the Bahá'ís in Kerman, Rafsanjan and Jiroft, under the pretext that the shops had been closed during the Bahá'í holy days (23 October and 12 November). In November 2014, twenty days after the businesses of the Bahá'ís in the cities of Kerman, Rafsanjan, Jiroft and Bam had been closed, the authorities continued to treat callously those whose businesses have been shut down. The business owners in Rafsanjan continued in their efforts to fight the obstructions put in their way by various government offices, such as the Public Places Supervision Office, the Finance Department, and especially the municipality, to obtain new business licenses. The shop owners decided that if the authorities would try to separate them by giving one group more lenient conditions, they would refuse to have their businesses unsealed, would stand by their friends, and insist that everyone be given the exact same conditions.

Subsequently, after continuous efforts by the owners, some of the shops in Rafsanjan have been permitted to reopen. However, as in the case of shop closures in Kerman, the shop owners in Rafsanjan were required to sign undertakings to "promise to close my business place according to the law and calendar of the country, and will observe my religious holy days in coordination with the Public Places Supervision Office and the Trades Union Council."

- On 18 November 2014 four shops in Nashtarud, Tonekabon, belonging to two Bahá'ís were sealed by Agents of the Public Places Supervision Office (Amaken) a few days after two Bahá'í Holy Days (23 October and 12 November). The authorities also visited 16 other shops belonging to Bahá'ís with the intention of sealing the businesses, but did not succeed because they lacked a warrant. The Bahá'ís immediately went to Sari, capital of the province, and tried to meet with the governor general, but were not successful. They returned to Tonekabon, met with the local governor and informed him of the incident. Thereafter they visited the Office of Industries and Mines in that city and sought their assistance. The person in charge of that office contacted the Public Places Supervision Office by telephone and asked about the reason for the closure of the shops. The response was, "The Bahá'ís close their shops with prior coordination (between themselves). This action is legally considered against national security." The individual from the Office of Industries and Mines responded, "We too close everything on Tasua and Ashura with prior coordination; is it also considered against national security?" He then encouraged the Bahá'ís to visit the public prosecutor's office, which they did and explained the situation to him. The prosecutor said, "Such actions have to be approved and agreed by me, whereas I am unaware of what has happened." After preliminary investigations, it became apparent that the warrant had been prepared illicitly, as the official stamp included on it was clearly inauthentic. The prosecutor in Tonekabon suggested that the Bahá'ís file a complaint against the agents of the Ministry of Intelligence so that their case would be investigated. In the evening of the same day, agents of the Public Places Supervision Office quietly unsealed and opened the shops.
- On 8 April 2015, agents of Amaken closed and sealed a store in Kashan owned by a Bahá'í who distributes optical lenses and eyeglasses, using a false pretext. The owner was detained for three days and released after providing collateral.

- On 16 April 2015, the grocery store of a Bahá’í in Khuzestan was sealed by the authorities. The only reason given was that the owner was a Bahá’í.
- On 14 April 2015, a Bahá’í was summoned by telephone to the Ministry of Intelligence Office in Sari, and interrogated for four hours. The focus of the questions posed by the Ministry of Intelligence agent was on identifying Bahá’ís:
  - in neighbouring localities,
  - who are physicians, builders or own businesses capable of generating good incomes,
  - who are employed in the private sector, such as clinic receptionists, etc.

On 21 April 2015 — a Bahá’í holy day — the Office of Amaken sealed a number of shops in Mazandaran and Kerman provinces.

A further eleven shops in Rafsanjan, seven shops in Kerman and six shops in Sari were sealed on 29 April 2015 — another Bahá’í holy day.

On 24 May 2015, the agents of the Public Places Supervision Office, in addition to the six shops that they had already closed in Sari, sealed off 11 other shops because they had not opened for business on Bahá’í Holy Days. Since April 2015, incidents occurring in Mazandaran province, are an indication of systematic and coordinated plans to impose further restrictions on the Bahá’ís there:

- The Public Places Supervision Office’s officials in Sari and Babol have recently been asking Bahá’ís who go to that office to renew their business licences, to sign an undertaking to the effect that they will not close their shops on Bahá’í Holy Days, and that even in an emergency, they need to obtain permission from the Public Places Supervision Office to be able to close their stores.
- Bahá’ís in Kerman have pursued the issue of the shop closings by visiting in person or submitting letters to relevant offices, such as the Governor’s Office and the Provincial Governor General to resolve their issue. On 10 May the Bahá’ís returned to the Office of Amaken, and later to the Ministry of Intelligence Office, they were told their office had nothing to do with their issue and that it must be resolved at another place. An officer expressed annoyance, and asked the Bahá’ís to go to the Office of Amaken in order to give an undertaking pledging not to close their shops, except for on official holidays. The shop owners insisted that they could not keep their shops open on Bahá’í Holy days and refused to sign the undertaking. At this point, the Intelligence officer said harshly, “If you do not cooperate, your business licences will be cancelled.” Since then, the various authorities’ treatment of the Bahá’ís has become more aggressive, and they generally try to avoid accepting responsibility.
- On 25 May 2015, when a number of Bahá’í shop owners from Kerman and Rafsanjan went to the Office of the President, they first asked for an appointment to visit the office of Hujjat’ul-Islam Younesi, special assistant to the president on ethnic and religious minorities affairs. Permission for a visit was not granted; however, no response was received. The Bahá’í shop owners then went to the President’s Office of Public Affairs and after going through the initial steps and submitting a letter to the person in charge, their complaint was very carefully reviewed by the staff in the office. It was suggested that the matter be referred to the headquarters of the Islamic Republic of Iran Police or the Office of the Supreme Leader. Having given this advice, the staff refused to accept the letter. It should be noted that the shop owners from Rafsanjan have followed the advice given to them and sent letters to the two offices suggested and pursued the matter in person.

Bahá'ís are being prevented from being promoted in certain types of professions and have been denied membership or presidency in their related trade, membership in syndicates and trade unions, participation in exhibitions, becoming well-known exporters or importers, or major distributors of any goods. They experience difficulties in obtaining business licences and endure financial restrictions. The following represents only those cases that have been reported to us since August 2014:

- A Bahá'í who is a goldsmith in Ghazvin, was summoned to the Public Places Supervision Office (Amaken), and his business license was confiscated. He has taken steps to challenge this action by filing multiple complaints to relevant authorities. In the past years, the Bahá'í in question had been repeatedly summoned to the Public Places Supervision Office for his business license and asked about his family, siblings, their places of residency and their addresses, home address, telephone number and a copy of the birth certificate for his wife and children. The Bahá'í was told that his children were not allowed to work in his shop and that he had to hire Muslims.
- In October 2014, an agent of the Office of Amaken (Public Places Supervision Office) in Semnan told a Bahá'í, "regarding any violation that we may overlook for others, we will apply the law with utmost scrutiny for you [Bahá'ís]." These violations can include lack of a business permit, overcharging, lack of insurance for employees, short changing, failure to submit invoices, having Bahá'í literature at work, having religious discussions at work, closure of the business.
- Pasargad Bank, which belongs to the Revolutionary Guards, has added a religion column to its form for opening a bank account. This type of practice is very rare and outside of the economic norms.
- Three Bahá'í war veterans were told that if they did not note their religion as "Muslim" on the pension form, the Veterans' Affairs Foundation would stop paying their pensions. The gentlemen refused to recant their Faith and their pensions were stopped as a result.
- In the fall of 2014 a Bahá'í in Yazd was asked by the Taxi Drivers' Association to submit a letter to the Office of Amaken, requesting a permit for carrying passengers outside the city boundaries. Upon receiving his notification of registration, he noticed that the authorities had put "perverse sect of Bahaiism" in the section for religion on his forms. His request for a permit was rejected and when he pursued this matter with the Taxi Drivers' Association, he was told that he had been disqualified because he is a Bahá'í. After a month and a half of receiving excuses from the officials concerned, the Bahá'í was informed that the committee had once again found him incompetent and that nothing further could be done.
- A Bahá'í visited the Trade Union for Household Repair Shops in Yazd in order to obtain a business permit in summer 2014. When he visited the union, he was told that Amaken has rejected him. The next day he went to the Office of Amaken and the section that determined the applicants' competency. Since they knew he was a Bahá'í, he was told that the committee had refused his case, because he would have to go to people's houses to do his work. He was also told that the office had received a circular instructing them not to give business licenses to Bahá'ís.
- Two music teachers were dismissed from their jobs in Babolsar for being Bahá'ís as a result of pressure placed on their superiors by the local office of the Ministry of Intelligence.

- Two Bahá'ís were dismissed from their position as music teachers in Sari because they were Bahá'ís. The dismissal came about at the instigation of the Intelligence Office. One of the two individuals had already been arrested on 22 November 2008 and charged with "propaganda against the regime".
- Three other Bahá'í music teachers in Sari were summoned to the Intelligence Office and were warned to stop their educational activities. One individual who was teaching in two institutes was dismissed, and the others had already been the victims of persecution for their belief, including house raids, confiscation of personal belongings and physical assault.
- In June 2015 a resident of Kata village, tried, for the first time, to obtain a business licence for selling hygiene products in a store she had opened in her backyard. She was told that it was illegal for her to have a shop in her backyard and thus she could not get a business licence. As a result, she moved her shop to the centre of the village and again applied for a licence, paying all the fees required. The licence was refused. When she asked why the licence had not been granted she was told that "It's because you teach the Bahá'í faith in your store." She responded that the Bahá'ís have served in the army, have been imprisoned and martyred, but they cannot get a licence to work and make a living. A few days later, the police visited the village and told her that if she did not get a business licence, they would close her shop. She then went back to the Public Places Supervision Office and spoke to the head of the office via a telephone in the waiting area. He told her that he could not give business licence to a woman because of a government circular. When she asked to see the circular, he said that this was not possible. She asked what she should do, to which he responded, "Go and be a shepherd or a carpet weaver." He then became angry and told her to go away. The Bahá'í returned to her shop and continued working. However, on the night of 02 May 2015, the shop was set on fire. Members of the Bahá'í family which owns the building were asleep above the shop, on the top floor. If they had not woken in time, they could well have lost their lives.
- A Bahá'í owning a bookbinding workshop in Vilashahr, Isfahan, has been banned from renting the second floor of his house to non-Bahá'í tenants and has been told that he must not renew his contract with the sitting tenants when their lease expires. The rationale behind this, given by the agent of the Ministry of Intelligence, was quoted to be: "with your good conduct you attract them, and then you infuse your religious beliefs into them. As a result, they become Bahá'ís, and then their families become Bahá'ís." His shop had been closed by agents of the Ministry of intelligence in November 2014.
- On 23 May 2015, at 6:30 pm, an agent from the Public Places Supervision Office and two agents from the Ministry of Intelligence Office in Isfahan visited the business premises of a Bahá'í, asked to see his business licence and took down information from it. The agents also asked him many questions about the kind of Bahá'í activities he carries out, the Bahá'í meetings in which he participates, his monthly-earnings and the number of his bank account. Subsequently the agents went to the shops of other Bahá'ís and took those individuals who did not have a business licence to the Public Places Supervision Office and spoke to them about teaching the Bahá'í faith.

### ***Denial of access to higher education, including vocational training***

As mentioned earlier, adherents of the Bahá'í Faith have long been denied access to higher education. Every year, hundreds of qualified young Bahá'ís are prevented from entering public and private universities and vocational training institutes in Iran.

The authorities are well aware that Bahá'ís, as a matter of principle, will not deny or lie about their religious affiliation. In 2004/2005, the government responded to international pressure by re-interpreting an entry on an official form so as to allow Bahá'ís to take the national university entrance exam without declaring their religion. But nearly all those who passed the entrance exams were blocked during the enrolment phase or expelled later, when it became known that they are members of the Bahá'í community. All the expelled students who appealed to relevant authorities, and/or through the courts, had their cases rejected.

- 2006-2007: over 800 Bahá'ís took the exam; 480 passed; 289 were admitted. They have since been identified as Bahá'ís and expelled, some during their final semester, just before graduation.
- 2007-2008: more than 1,000 Bahá'ís took the exam, approximately 800 were informed that their papers would not be graded (reason given: "incomplete file" – none who followed up on this false classification obtained recourse); 121 were admitted. They have since been identified as Bahá'ís and expelled.
- 2008-2009: entrance exam results were available on only one website, where all those previously identified as Bahá'ís (at school or elsewhere) were transferred to – note the final letters: [http://82.99.202.139/karsarasari/87/index.php?msg=error\\_bah](http://82.99.202.139/karsarasari/87/index.php?msg=error_bah) – a page containing the message: "Error: 'Incomplete File.... None of them were able to enrol.

Since then, the government has done nothing to reverse or counter these instructions, implemented throughout the country. University enrolment forms include declarations of religion, and many officials do not allow these to be left blank. Even during the academic year, university authorities have summoned students and demanded that they identify their religion. Whenever a student was identified as a Bahá'í, he or she was expelled.

The few students admitted without their religious affiliation being known were later expelled from university when it was discovered that they were Bahá'ís. Many have appealed such cases.

Several official documents provide evidence that the expulsion of Bahá'í students constitutes official policy. Chief among these is a communication sent in 2006 by the Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. Addressed to 81 Iranian universities (the names of which were listed), it instructed them to expel any student discovered to be a Bahá'í, at the time of enrolment or during his/her studies.<sup>6</sup> The communication also indicated that these instructions were being promulgated under "decree number 1327/M/S, dated 6/12/69 [= 25 February 1991]". This refers to the 1991 memorandum from the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council already mentioned above, which was also cited in an implementation letter from the Central Security Office of Payame Noor University to its regional branches in November 2006. A related letter in March 2007 mandated instructions "to prevent the enrolment of the Bahá'í applicants".<sup>7</sup> To this day, this memorandum is referred to as a justification of dismissal of Bahá'í students from university.

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<sup>6</sup> The 2006 letter to universities can be accessed at:

Persian: [http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/1\\_LetterFromMinistriesToUniversities.pdf](http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/1_LetterFromMinistriesToUniversities.pdf)

English: [http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/1\\_LetterFromMinistriesToUniversities\\_en.pdf](http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/1_LetterFromMinistriesToUniversities_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> For the March 2007 letter, see:

Persian: [http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/2\\_LetterToPayam-i-NurUniversity.pdf](http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/2_LetterToPayam-i-NurUniversity.pdf)

During the 2014-2015 academic year, 300 cases of denial to higher education were reported. Bahá'í youth continue to be denied access to higher education in any form, from any source in Iran; and those few who are granted access, are expelled from public and private universities and vocational training as soon as they are identified as Bahá'ís. During this academic year, the government has taken new measures to prevent the Bahá'í applicants from obtaining nominal proofs of this denial. However, the government's denial of higher education to Bahá'ís is officially recorded in a publication issued by *Sanjesh*, the national academic evaluation and measurement organization of Iran's Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. Entitled, "*A guide to enrolling and participating in the national entrance examination for academic year 1394 [2015–2016]*"<sup>8</sup>, this 50-page publication presents detailed guidelines on the application process for students wishing to enter university in Iran, including criteria for admission. The first admission criterion of the publication by *Sanjesh* states as follows on page 4 under the heading 'General Requirements':

*"A belief in Islam or in one of the recognized religions (Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian) in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran".*

This requirement of Iran's own official admission document clearly states that access to higher education in Iran is restricted only to those who believe in Islam or in one of the three other recognized religions specified in Iran's Constitution – thus excluding those who believe in the Bahá'í Faith.

Although Islamic teachings and Article 23 of the Constitution strongly forbid the investigation of individuals' beliefs, it is clear that Bahá'ís are denied their fundamental rights solely because they are identified as such. Most Bahá'ís are identified early in the university application process and are not even permitted to complete the procedure.

Since its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran has employed different tactics to prevent Bahá'ís from entering universities. In the previous years, for example, Bahá'ís were told that their files were "incomplete" when they tried to get university entrance examinations results. Whether flashed on a computer screen and printed out or delivered by letter, that message left a paper trail. During this academic year, the government has taken new measures to prevent Bahá'í applicants from obtaining nominal proofs of this denial. This academic year, when Bahá'í students sought their exam results online, many found the following written in front of their names:

*"Please write to Post Office Box 3166- 31635 Karaj, or go to the National Education Measurement and Evaluation Organization, Inquiries Unit."*

Several of them visited the above-referenced office in Karaj and made inquiries; they were all shown the *Sanjesh* publication. The new strategy clearly shows an effort by the government to deprive Bahá'ís of any document or paper that can be used to prove that they were denied higher education because of their religious beliefs. It is rather unfortunate that instead of finding a solution to extend university admissions to its Bahá'í citizens, Iran is constantly finding new ways to block their access.

The following represents only those cases that have been reported to us since August 2014:

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English: [http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/2\\_LetterToPayam-i-NurUniversity\\_en.pdf](http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/2_LetterToPayam-i-NurUniversity_en.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> See 'A guide to enrolling and participating in the national entrance examination for academic year 1394 [2015–2016]' (in Persian) for the booklet

- In August 2014, a Bahá'í from Isfahan was expelled from University after having completed two semesters in the field of foreign language due to her belief in the Bahá'í Faith. An agent from the Ministry of Intelligence in Najafabad (Isfahan), denied having knowledge that Bahá'ís are being denied access to higher education because of their religious beliefs. Also, the Director of the University told her that he was not able to do anything and referred her to Harasat (the office of the Security Services). The person in charge of the Office of Harasat confirmed that she was being expelled on account of her religion, but refused to confirm this in writing. He indicated that if the university director knew she was a Bahá'í, she would not have been allowed to advance to the second semester. He also told her that "Since your [administrative] centre is in Israel and Israel is our enemy, we have the right to treat our enemies like this [sic]." She was given the test results containing grades for her two semesters of studies and the report indicated that she was "expelled" during her second year. However, the university refused to give her a written explanation of her expulsion.
- A Bahá'í student was expelled from a University in Isfahan. After expressing their regrets and praising her work, the officials at the university stated that the [campus] security officials had been responsible for her expulsion.
- Four other Bahá'ís in Isfahan have been deprived of higher education through the pretext that their university entrance examinations were "incomplete". Between 29 September and 30 October 2014 they have submitted grievances to the Court of Administrative Justice, to the Office of the Presidency and other authorities.
- A Bahá'í with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in Iran and a master's degree in civil engineering in Greece, was planning to pursue a doctoral degree at a university in England. She was summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence office in Isfahan and was interrogated concerning her efforts to obtain a visa from the British Embassy in Turkey to continue her education in England. During the interrogation, the agents of the Ministry of Intelligence repeatedly urged her to take her family and leave the country.
- A Bahá'í in Kermanshah, whose university entrance examination was designated as "incomplete", has retained a lawyer in order to make a formal complaint against the directives of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution. She has filed a complaint to the Court of Administrative Justice and mailed it on 9 November 2014.
- A Bahá'í girl from Kermanshah received a notification stating that her examination file was "incomplete". Her father - who has been deprived of access to higher education for the past 32 years and whose residence was already raided on 7 April 2011 - filed a complaint with the Court of Administrative Justice against the Ministry of Education, without avail.
- The father subsequently wrote a letter of protest to the head of Court of Administrative Justice for reconsideration. He also wrote to the head of the General Board of the Court of Administrative Justice, requesting that the decision be reconsidered. Both the father and the daughter met with the renowned lawyer and human rights defender Mrs. Nasrin Sotoudeh in front of the Bar Association and were advised to pursue their complaint through the Bar Association of the Kermanshah Commission on Human Rights. Both of them have written separate letters to the head of the Commission, requesting its assistance and guidance in pursuing the matter with the Court of Administrative Justice.
- In February 2015, a Bahá'í from Najafabad was expelled from University on the grounds that she was a Bahá'í. On 29 December 2014, at the start of the first term exams, the girl

was asked to go to admissions office of the university because she had entered “other” for her religion when she registered. When she said that she was a Bahá’í she was told to leave. A few days later, her student online account read: “The process of your studies has encountered problems raised by the Security Office—refer to university Admissions Office.” When she raised the problem with the director, she was told that she must change her response of “other” in the religion section since Bahá’ís do not have the right to go to university. Despite her requests, the head of the Department of Education merely showed her the university admissions booklet, according to which only students from recognized religions are eligible to register for university. The girl received the following note by the head of the Department of Education: “We hereby inform you that according to the guidelines for the enrolment of students (general rules), it is not permissible to enrol students from religions that are not specified in the Constitution.” Around May 2015 the Admission Office of Azad university in Najafabad asked the Bahá’í to state in writing that her expulsion from university was not because of her belief.

- A male student in the field of music from the University of Beiza in Shiraz, was expelled before the end of the semester around March 2015. He is one of the best students.
- In April 2015 one young girl and three male students have been expelled from their respective universities in Sari and Ahvaz because of their membership in the Bahá’í Faith.

Finally, we would add that shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, all Bahá’í students enrolled at the time were expelled from university, and Bahá’í university professors and lecturers were summarily dismissed from their positions. In the late 1980s, the Bahá’í community made informal arrangements to begin offering university-level courses and vocational training to Bahá’í students, conducted through distance learning and in the privacy of Bahá’í homes, using the volunteer services of the Bahá’í professors who had been fired from their jobs. The Iranian government made repeated attempts to stop this quiet, peaceful initiative known as the Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), most notably in 1998, 2001, 2003 and 2011.

The Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) was created with the objective to meet the educational needs of young Bahá’ís, who have been denied access to university level studies in the country since three generations.

Since May 2011, we have been documenting cases that concern educators and students arrested because of their participation in the work of the Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). At the time of the concerted attack against faculty and staff in 2011, nearly 300 people were serving the Institute, including international volunteer educators who teach through the Internet. About 1,000 BIHE students were studying at home and in inconspicuous laboratories in privately owned premises. Seven individuals are currently serving prison terms ranging from four to five years, solely because they had been providing courses to young Bahá’ís with the capacity and deep desire to continue their studies beyond secondary school. Educators, administrators or collaborators, these seven individuals have volunteered their time and skills to help young Bahá’ís with the advancement of their country.

In the case of the Bahá’ís, rather than intensifying opportunities for access to higher education as was recommended, Iran has intensified its efforts to deny higher education to students and considers the act of educating young people a criminal offence.

Many of the Bahá’ís involved in the concerted attack in 2011 have been repeatedly harassed:

- On 1 March 2015, agents of the Intelligence Office in Shiraz went to the home of one of the 17 people who were arrested in a coordinated countrywide series of raids on 22 May 2011. The raid targeted 39 residences of people associated with the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). After searching the house, the Agents confiscated the usual items.
- A Bahá'í couple is currently waiting to serve their respective five and four year sentences under *ta'zir law*. One of the charges against them was “activities against national security through membership in BIHE”. They are expecting to be summoned to start their prison terms soon. In April 2015 the wife was summoned by telephone to serve her sentence, and on 5 May 2015, a hearing was held for the husband in the court of appeals. They were both volunteer lecturers for the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) and their home was raided on 22 May 2011 by agents of the Ministry of Intelligence. The wife was also one of the 17 Bahá'ís who were arrested in a mass raid on the 39 residences of people associated with BIHE on 22 May 2011. Their son, Bashir, was 17 months old at the time of the raid of their home. He is now five years old and the greatest concern of the couple is how Bashir will survive without them when they are serving their sentences.
- Conditional release has also been denied to six BIHE educators who fulfilled the requirement that prisoners serve a minimum of one third of their sentence before being eligible. Five of the six individuals had applied for conditional release, and that the Iranian government had denied them on the ground that this type of release is not yet available to political and religious prisoners. In the case of the sixth educator, still imprisoned, his sentence being longer than those of the other BIHE educators, i.e. five years, he has requested conditional release almost one year ago, approximately in July 2014, and has not received any response to date. The sentences handed down against them remain profoundly unjust and constitute the fruit of unlawful and discriminatory policies aimed at suffocating the progress of the Bahá'ís and their contribution to the advancement of their country.