

Nature of the Persecution against the Bahá'ís in Iran: Background and documentation

(September 2013 edition)

This report presents the historical and legal background of the persecution that has targeted Bahá'ís in Iran since the Islamic Revolution, and documents the major upsurge in human rights violations against them since 2005. The abuses involve not only civil and political rights, but also a wide range of social, economic and cultural rights, as can be seen in the Table of Contents, below.

Developments during the past year are reported in our UPR implementation document, in attachment.

Additional information can also be found at:

<http://www.bic.org/persecution-bahai-community>

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All of the referenced documents and editions can also be obtained in print from Bahá'í International Community representatives.

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1. Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran – historical and legal context

The Bahá'ís have been persecuted throughout the history of their Faith in Iran. Early followers faced violent opposition from religious authorities and governing dynasties in Persia – some 20,000 perished in pogroms during the 19th century. The persecution continued intermittently thereafter, increasing when governments felt the need to appease fundamentalist Islamic leaders or to curry their favour.

Some conservative members of the Islamic leadership view the Bahá'í Faith as a threat to Islam and brand Bahá'ís as apostates. The progressive ideas of the Faith on matters such as women's rights, the independent investigation of truth and the absence of clergy are of concern to many fundamentalist Muslim clerics. In addition, for Iran's Shi'ite establishment the emergence of an independent religion that postdates the Qur'an is theologically abhorrent. Members of the Shi'ite establishment in Iran have long been determined to extinguish the new faith and suppress its followers.

Following the Islamic Revolution, there was a sharp increase in the systematic governmental programme to eliminate the Bahá'í community in the country, with a parallel increase in human rights violations against individual Bahá'ís. Since the early 1980s, over 200 have been executed or murdered, thousands arrested, detained, interrogated, and tens of thousands deprived of jobs, pensions and educational opportunities. The community's holy places, cemeteries and property have been confiscated, vandalized or destroyed; many individuals have had homes and other property seized or damaged, and discrimination against Bahá'ís is official policy, as detailed in the relevant sections below.

1.1 The government memorandum on "the Bahá'í question"

The official nature of the persecution came to light in 1993 with the publication, by the former UN Special Representative on Iran, of an Iranian government memorandum establishing a policy on "the Bahá'í question". Drafted by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and approved by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the memorandum gave explicit instructions to ensure that the "progress and development" of the Bahá'í community "shall be blocked." Its provisions, still in effect today, include directives denying access to higher education and many kinds of employment for anyone known to be a Bahá'í.¹

As we have often stated, the Bahá'í community poses no threat to the authorities in Iran. It is not aligned with any other government, ideology or opposition movement. The principles of the Faith require Bahá'ís to obey the laws of their country and to avoid partisan political involvement, subversive activity and all forms of violence. The Bahá'ís

¹ The text of the 1991 government memorandum can be accessed through the following links:
Persian original: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5_TheISRCCdocument.pdf
English translation: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5_TheISRCCdocument_en.pdf

seek no special privileges but only their rights under the International Bill of Human Rights (to which Iran is Party), in particular the right to life, liberty and security of person, the right to profess and practice their religion individually and in community with others, and the rights to education and work.

1.2 Constitutional issues

The Bahá'í community is the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran, but it is not recognized as such by the authorities. Article 13 of Iran's Constitution stipulates that Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are the only *recognized* religious minorities. When Iranian officials use the term "religious minorities", they mean only those three, so measures in favour of religious minorities do not apply to Bahá'ís.² Most importantly, Article 13 limits freedom of religious *practice* to recognized religions only, stripping other religions of this freedom and legitimizing the persecution of individuals who practice those religions. The Islamic regime refers to the Bahá'í community as a "misguided" or "deviant sect", a cult, or an "illegal association".

Article 26 of Iran's Constitution restricts freedom of association as follows: "Parties, associations, political groups and trade unions and Islamic or recognized religious minorities shall be free, provided they do not violate the principles of independence, liberty, national unity and Islamic standards and the foundation of the Islamic Republic." Freedom of association does not exist for Bahá'ís, once again because it is granted only to recognized minorities and those considered in conformity with "Islamic standards".

Iranian officials quote Articles 14³ and 20⁴ of Iran's Constitution when claiming that every citizen of their country enjoys "all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights". However, Article 20 limits these rights by adding the proviso "in conformity with Islamic criteria", leading to the exclusion of Bahá'ís from equality and protection before the law.

Article 19 of the Constitution provides that the people of Iran "shall enjoy equal rights and the complexion, race, language and the like shall not be considered as a privilege". No reference is made to religion (or gender) in this context: the Constitution does not explicitly recognize the principle of religious non-discrimination. In practice, Bahá'ís are subjected to unfair and discriminatory treatment regarding access to higher education,

² The government's restricted use of the term "religious minorities" was clearly stated in 2010 in Iran's national reports to the UPR and to the UN Human Rights Committee.

³ Article 14 reads: "In accordance with the sacred verse "God does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with those who have not fought against you because of your religion and who have not expelled you from your homes" [60:8], the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and all Muslims are duty-bound to treat non-Muslims in conformity with ethical norms and the principles of Islamic justice and equity, and to respect their human rights. This principle applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran." *To avoid applying the provisions of this article to Bahá'ís, Iranian officials constantly accuse them of engaging in activities "against Islam and the Islamic Republic".*

⁴ Article 20: "All citizens of the country, both men and women, equally enjoy the protection of the law and enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, in conformity with Islamic criteria."

employment, business, cemeteries and places of worship. Examples are given in the following sections.

Finally, it should be noted that Article 23 of Iran's Constitution reads as follows: "The investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief." Nevertheless, the authorities have launched a vast information-gathering campaign during the past eight years, specifically to identify and monitor the activities of all Bahá'ís, as detailed below.

2. Denial of the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly

The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy. Its institutions perform many of the functions reserved to clergy in other religions and are the foundational element of Bahá'í community life. Bahá'í councils (called assemblies) exist in over 180 countries and territories throughout the world, following the same administrative rules and organizing similar activities. Many maintain centres where Bahá'ís gather.

The Iranian Bahá'í community annually elected an assembly of nine members to look after its vital needs until 1983, when the government called for the institutions to be dismantled. The National Spiritual Assembly of Iran dissolved itself and the rest of the administrative structure as a demonstration of goodwill. Since then, the Bahá'í community in Iran has been denied freedom of association and the right to peaceful assembly. No Bahá'í community centres are permitted in Iran.

As a result, Iran's Bahá'ís made arrangements to worship in small groups, hold classes for children, study and discuss their Faith, and take care of other community needs in their homes. The authorities have long attempted to prevent individual Bahá'ís from participating in religious gatherings, activities and events of Bahá'í community life. Since 2004, officials have intensified their pressure (intimidation, harassment, threats...), ordering Bahá'ís to suspend social, educational and community-related activities – in other words, everything but the individual observance of religious obligations. For Bahá'ís, however, many of these activities are an integral part of their religious practice.

Moreover, every religious community must have some means of administering its own affairs. Not allowed to maintain their institutions, the Bahá'ís of Iran formed ad hoc groups to organize the activities of the community and to serve its members at national and local levels. For years, the authorities knew about and tolerated the functioning of these groups, but early in 2009, the government declared **all** Bahá'í administrative arrangements illegal.⁵

⁵ According to a press release by official Iranian news agencies on 15 February 2009 (also announced on national TV), this declaration was made by Iran's Prosecutor General.

The Bahá'í International Community issued an open letter to the Prosecutor General in 2009 and another to the Head of the Judiciary in 2010 about this and related issues.⁶

The community's seven former leaders – the informal group administering the affairs of the community at national level – had already been arrested in 2008.⁷ Subjected to intensive interrogation and ill-treatment while in solitary confinement and then repeatedly denied release on bail, they were detained in section 209 of Evin prison in Tehran for over two years. At their trial in 2010, the court found no evidence to establish guilt on charges that could have carried the death penalty but convicted the Bahá'ís on six other charges and imposed the maximum sentence, 20 years in prison. The appeals court revoked the three charges alleging “espionage”, “collaboration with the State of Israel”, and “provision of classified documents to foreign nationals with the intention of undermining State security” – but still presented as illegal the religious beliefs of the former leaders and their service to the Bahá'í community. Its ruling reduced their sentences to 10 years of imprisonment. However, in March 2011 we heard that the original 20-year sentences had been reinstated.

While their case was on appeal, the former leaders were transferred to Gohardasht/Rajaishahr prison, notorious for its brutally harsh conditions. The five men remain imprisoned there; the two women have been moved twice and are now back in Evin prison in Tehran. They have been denied temporary leave from prison, to which they are entitled.

It should be noted that these seven cases are the object of Opinion No. 34/2008 issued by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. In his 2011 report on human rights in Iran to the General Assembly, the UN Secretary-General noted that “The High Commissioner for Human Rights has raised this case several times in letters to and meetings with the Iranian authorities, expressing deep concern that these trials did not meet the requirements of due process and fair trial.”⁸

3. Denial of the rights to life, liberty and security of person

A national effort to identify members of the Bahá'í community throughout Iran began in 2005, and the persecution against them has greatly increased in the years since then. In March 2006, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief expressed her grave concern about a letter sent in 2005 by the Head of the Armed Forces,⁹ to the

⁶ See <http://news.bahai.org/story/702> and <http://news.bahai.org/story/801>

⁷ The names of these Bahá'í leaders are: Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm. Mrs. Sabet was arrested on 5 March 2008, and the six others on 14 May 2008.

⁸ A/66/361, 15 September 2011

⁹ The text of the letter (in both the original Persian and English translation) can be accessed through the following page: <http://www.bahaiworldnews.org/story/473>

Ministry of Information, Revolutionary Guard, *Basij*, Police, Army and others, copied to the Head of the Judiciary and Office of the Supreme Leader. The letter refers to “the misguided sects of Baháism and Babism” and states that “according to the instructions of [Iran’s] Supreme Leader”:

“...the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces has been given the mission to acquire a comprehensive and complete report of all the activities of these sects (including political, economic, social and cultural) for the purpose of identifying all the individuals of these misguided sects. Therefore, we request that you convey to relevant authorities to, in a highly confidential manner, collect any and all information about the above-mentioned activities of these individuals and report it to this Command Headquarters.”

Implementation orders were sent out in 2006, instructing officials to complete a questionnaire about local Bahá’ís and to “cautiously and sensitively monitor and supervise” all Bahá’í social/educational activities.¹⁰ Through the years since then, police and Ministry of Information officials (i.e. Iran’s intelligence services, henceforth referred to as the Intelligence Ministry) have interrogated many hundreds of Bahá’ís throughout the country and harassed or misled them to give details about others. Once they had been identified, Bahá’ís and some of their non-Bahá’í friends of all ages became the targets of physical assaults, arson attacks, vandalism, harassment and intimidation, as detailed in the following section.

Of course, other groups have also suffered. The authorities cracked down on civil society, academics, women's rights and trade union activists, students, journalists, bloggers, and participants in peaceful demonstrations, particularly before and after the elections in 2009 and 2012. Human rights defenders have been particularly hard hit, as the authorities attempt to silence anyone who reports human rights violations to the international community, including any Bahá’ís who do so.

3.1 Violent attacks

The effort to identify Bahá’ís throughout the country, described above, was accompanied by a major media campaign vilifying the Bahá’í Faith and its adherents, launched in 2004 and continuing to this day (see section 9, below). Violent attacks then began to target known Bahá’ís in many localities, and members of the community also faced increased harassment and intimidation from officials, anonymous callers and plainclothes agents. Some received death threats, were assaulted, or evicted from their homes. Bahá’í cemeteries, vehicles, farms, orchards, shops and workplaces were badly damaged or defaced with graffiti;¹¹ a few were totally destroyed. Incidents involving arson occurred in series targeting different Bahá’ís in the same town.

¹⁰ Detailed information was sought: places of residence, occupations, education, names of all the members of each family, how they related to their Muslim neighbours and colleagues, etc. To read the English translation of the August 2006 letter from the Ministry of the Interior in this regard, [click here](#). To view the original August 2006 letter in Persian, [click here](#)

¹¹ Photos documenting some of these attacks can be found at: <http://news.bahai.org/story/645>. ; <http://news.bahai.org/story/805>; <http://www.bahairights.org/2009/07/08/image-compilation-of-attacks-on-bahai-property-in-iran-in-the-last-year/>; <http://www.iranpresswatch.org/post/1515>; and <http://www.bahairights.org/2009/09/19/anti-bahai-messages-sprayed-on-walls-in-ardestan-iran/>.

The community in Karaj was affected in 2008-2009, and violence was directed against Bahá'í shops and small businesses in Rafsanjan from 2008 through 2011, particularly after a newsletter linked to local clergy claimed that Bahá'ís had monopolized some private business sectors. In Semnan, following arrests in 2008 that identified local Bahá'ís, repeated violence has targeted homes, shops and vehicles belonging to them and their relatives. Incited by incendiary sermons, anti-Bahá'í seminars and rallies, the constantly renewed attacks seem deliberately intended to pressure all Bahá'ís to leave Semnan. In the village of Ivel, ± 50 homes belonging to Bahá'ís were razed in 2010, and there have been diverse signs of intent to drive Bahá'ís out of Abadeh, Aligudarz, Bukan, Khorramabad, Laljin, Parsabad, Sari and Ravansar, as well as Asfin and Gaziran in the suburbs of Arak. Bahá'í farmers living near the village of Kata have come under repeated attack, as well.

It is very difficult for members of the community to obtain recourse in such cases, as the police do not investigate or do not seem able to find the perpetrators. Even when informed of an impending attack against Bahá'ís or their property, the police offer no protection. The violence is condoned by religious authorities and committed with total impunity. Officials sometimes say that the Iranian people consider Bahá'ís as infidels and want to attack them. On the contrary, it has been the experience of Iran's Bahá'í community that many of their fellow countrymen respect and admire Bahá'ís for their ideals, good character and steadfastness. Negative attitudes are expressed and fostered by Islamic leaders and government officials.

3.2 Arbitrary arrests and imprisonments

To put recent events in context, it should be recalled that five Bahá'ís were in Iranian prisons in 2001, four in 2002-2003, and only two were arrested in 2004. Then the persecution began to intensify again. From late 2004 to the present day, there have been over **700** arrests.

During 2011, the number of Bahá'ís in prison rose steadily for six months – from 57 in January to 103 in June – and then remained high, peaking in July (when 111 Bahá'ís were in prison) and again in September 2011 (when the total rose to 112). During 2012, over **180** Bahá'ís were arrested and the number incarcerated never went below 100, reaching **116** in August and again in November and December. In addition, since 2005, intelligence officers have summoned well over 1000 more for interrogation without officially arresting them. Details for all active cases and cumulative figures are given in the list of Bahá'ís imprisoned in Iran to date, provided in attachment.

Members of the community have been arrested in localities throughout the country. Recently, however, more have been detained in section 209 of Evin prison in Tehran – a section reportedly controlled by the Intelligence Ministry – where detainees are sometimes kept in solitary confinement, suffer ill-treatment, and are interrogated for months without charge. Most have been detained for weeks or months before being released on bail, and bail demands have been very high, requiring families to hand over deeds to property, business or work licences. In nearly all cases, their homes and/or

workplaces were searched and personal belongings confiscated, in particular books, photos and materials related to the Bahá'í Faith, along with computers, copying machines, supplies, and in some cases valuable documents such as deeds to property.

Responding to pressure from the international community, the Iranian authorities have not sentenced any Bahá'ís to death, nor to life imprisonment, since the 1990s. Recent prison terms have ranged from a few months to 20 years, and some have been condemned to additional time in internal exile.

The fact that they are arrested and imprisoned on religious grounds is, in itself, a violation of international human rights law. Article 18 of the ICCPR (to which Iran is Party) guarantees the “freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest [one’s] religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.” But many Bahá'ís in Iran have been sentenced to prison terms on charges of “activity against national security” and “spreading propaganda against the regime”, solely for having manifested their religious beliefs. Other charges vary widely, from merely “possessing a satellite dish receiver” to “corruption on earth”, which can carry the death penalty in Iran. According to recent verdicts, Iran’s judiciary considers as a criminal offense: “membership in... the misguided Bahaist sect”, in other words simply being a member of the Bahá'í religious community.

Being a human rights defender can also constitute a criminal offense in Iran. As mentioned above, one of the charges against the seven Bahá'í leaders was “provision of classified documents to foreign nationals with the intention of undermining State security”. We refer to many of those documents in this report, as they concerned human rights violations and were submitted by our office to UN Special Procedures from 2006 to 2008.

4. Denial of the right to education

4.1 Elementary and secondary schools

Children and adolescents known to be Bahá'ís are subjected to harassment, vilification and psychological pressure in primary, middle and high schools throughout Iran – and these abuses are committed by their teachers and school administrators. Many pupils have been threatened with expulsion or forced to change schools. In hundreds of incidents, young Bahá'ís were pressured to convert to Islam, obliged to use textbooks that denigrate and falsify their religious heritage, singled out as their Faith was attacked... and all who dared to respond were severely reprimanded.

In parallel, schoolteachers were “educated” about the Bahá'í Faith. The materials provided for them perpetuated falsifications that have been disseminated since the early days of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran, and were remarkably similar to defamatory propaganda in the media (described in section 9, below). Anti-Bahá'í leaflets were distributed in schools, and efforts were made through the school system to identify Bahá'í students of all ages and the members of their families. For example, a form circulated by the

Education Department Management Security Office in Shiraz had to be completed for all students “who belong to religious minorities and the perverse Bahaist sect”. The form required information not only about the student and his/her parents, but also about all of the student’s siblings. A Ministry of Education directive in November 2011 not only called for all Bahá’í pupils to be identified, but explicitly included pre-schoolers: children in kindergarten.

In one particularly serious case in 2010, a Bahá’í child in the first grade at a public school in Shiraz was hit and later burned with a utensil by her ethics teacher because she was not participating in the school’s congregational prayer. When her mother went to the school to object, the ethics teacher (in the presence of the principal and other teachers) expressed pride in having done this. The pupil’s father took legal action, having obtained a letter from a medical examiner confirming the injury to the child. Only then was the teacher reprimanded.

4.2 Higher education

Members of the Bahá’í Faith have long been denied access to higher education. It is an official policy of the government to expel Bahá’ís from universities and vocational training institutions, as soon as they are identified as members of the community.

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 in a way that allowed Bahá’ís to take the national university entrance exam without declaring their religion.¹² For several years, small numbers obtained admittance but, one by one, those who began their studies were identified as Bahá’ís and expelled – some during their final semester, just before graduation. Moreover, the token number of those admitted decreased each year:

- *2006-2007*: over 800 Bahá’ís took the exam; 480 passed; 289 were admitted. Well over half were expelled within a year and nearly all the others since then.
- *2007-2008*: >1,000 Bahá’ís took the exam, ± 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 admitted, almost all since 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 – a page with the message: “Error: ‘Incomplete File....’” Only those who had never been identified as members of the community were able to obtain their results and

¹² The authorities stated that the required entry for “religion” on the application form for the national university entrance examination was not meant to identify the student’s religion but only the required course of religious study that he or she had chosen. In Iran, this exam includes a section testing knowledge of one religion. Applicants choose the religion on which they wish to be tested, but there are only four options: the four recognized religions.

enrol. This practice became established, and very few Bahá'ís have been admitted in the years since (exact number not known).

Several official documents specify that this is 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), the letter instructed them to expel any student discovered to be a Bahá'í, at the time of enrolment or during his/her studies.¹³ 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.

Note that the 2006 letter was sent out the year that Bahá'ís were finally able to take the national entrance exam, which was also the first year since the Islamic Revolution that a token few had been admitted to university. The instructions in that letter cited "decree number 1327/M/S, dated 6/12/69 [= 25 February 1991]". This refers to the 1991 memorandum from the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council (see section 1.1, above), which includes the directive: "They [Bahá'í students] must 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". Other official letters that same year confirmed that the instructions were being implemented throughout the country.^{14 15}

Some individual cases were documented in a report published in December 2010 by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. Its very partial list of 70 students barred or expelled from universities on political or religious grounds that year includes 17 Bahá'ís. For details, see: <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/12/punishing-stars-dec2010/>. The most recent reports that we have received concern 15 Bahá'ís expelled in 2012, many of whom were ranked among the top students in their classes, and five more expelled in January-February 2013.

All the Bahá'í students who have appealed against their expulsions with relevant educational authorities, and/or through the courts, have seen their cases rejected and dismissed. In some of their verdicts, the courts explicitly referred to the 1991 policy document from the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council. Not a single expulsion case has ever been decided in favour of a Bahá'í.

¹³ The 2006 letter to universities can be accessed at:

Persian: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/1_LetterFromMinistriesToUniversities.pdf

English: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/1_LetterFromMinistriesToUniversities_en.pdf

¹⁴ For example, see a letter from the Central Security Office of Payame Noor University, November 2006:

Persian original: http://info.bahai.org/pdf/payame_noor_univ_memo_farsi.pdf

English translation: http://info.bahai.org/pdf/payame_noor_univ_memo_english.pdf

¹⁵ A related letter dated 17 March 2007 can be accessed at:

Persian: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/2_LetterToPayam-i-NurUniversity.pdf

English: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/2_LetterToPayam-i-NurUniversity_en.pdf

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 to Bahá'í students, conducted in private through distance learning and/or in Bahá'í homes and premises, 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), notably in 1998, 2001 and 2003.

In 2011, intelligence officers acted against Bahá'ís engaged in BIHE courses in cities throughout the country. The latest joint report submitted by UN Special Procedures (A/HRC/22/67) recalls the following communication to the Iranian government:

09/06/2011 JUA, IRN 8/2011, Iran (Islamic Republic of)

Arbitrary detention; Freedom of religion; Minority issues;

Alleged arrests and arbitrary detention of members of religious minorities, in particular those belonging to the Bahá'í faith. According to the information received, on 21 May 2011, raids were carried out in at least 30 homes of individuals involved in the activities of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education. These households were reportedly subjected to extensive searches which took place simultaneously in cities throughout the country, including Gohardasht, Isfahan, Karaj, Sari, Shiraz, Tehran and Zahedan, with 15 individuals being arrested. A further eight other members of the Bahá'í faith were reportedly interrogated by intelligence officers, and were released on the same day. These events reportedly form part of a continuous effort to deny access to education to members of the Bahá'í faith, who are reportedly being prevented from entering public and private universities and vocational training institutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In all, 40 households were searched, with confiscation of personal belongings and computers, and dozens of Bahá'ís were interrogated. Nineteen had been arrested by the end of June; 12 were later released, but seven remained in prison for five months before facing trial. All seven were convicted of “membership of the deviant Bahaist sect, with the goal of taking action against the security of the country, in order to further the aims of the deviant sect and those of organizations outside the country.” One has since been released, but the six others are serving four or five year sentences (their names are in the list of Bahá'ís currently in prison, annexed to this document). The judgements presented activities in support of the BIHE as crimes. There is no foundation whatsoever to the accusations.

This concerted action against the BIHE provides clear evidence of the government's determined efforts to deny higher education – in any form, from any source – to members of the non-recognized Bahá'í religious minority in Iran.

Further background information can be found at: <http://denial.bahai.org/index.php>.

5. Denial of the right to housing and other property

The property rights of Bahá'ís are generally disregarded in Iran. In documented cases since 1979, officials have abusively confiscated more than 2,000 properties belonging to Bahá'ís throughout the country: houses, apartments, buildings, offices, shops, factories, other businesses, farms, agricultural land and orchards, as well as Bahá'í holy places and cemeteries, which had previously been the private property of individual Bahá'ís or of the community as a whole.

Confiscations were often accompanied by threats and physical violence, before and during forced evictions. Some cases were taken to court, but the judgements demonstrated that the authorities consider the Bahá'í Faith as an illegal movement and legitimise human rights violations against Iranian citizens who are members of the community. Some verdicts have declared that the confiscation of property from “the evil sect of the Baha’i” is legally and religiously justifiable.¹⁶

In addition, since 2005 there has been a marked increase in the number of summary searches of Bahá'í homes and workplaces during which personal belongings have been seized. Computers, mobile phones, books, photos, documents (including deeds and business licenses), printed material and possessions related in any way to Bahá'í activities are routinely confiscated during these searches.

Confiscation and destruction of property belonging to Bahá'ís has continued in recent years, and their right to inherit is systematically denied. In April 2010, for example, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards confiscated 5,000 square meters of land in Ghaemshahr (Mazandaran province) 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. In the village of Ivel in the same province, members of a previously large community still tended farmland and harvested crops even though for many years Bahá'ís had not been able to return to their homes without being attacked. In June 2010, homes belonging to some 50 Bahá'í families in this village were destroyed. All the Bahá'í homes in Ivel were later razed, and the land was cleared to erase evidence.¹⁷ During the past two years, the authorities have also taken measures to confiscate farmland from 17 Bahá'í families in the village of Kata.

The seizure of cemeteries has been particularly cruel, as numerous Bahá'í families were given access only to areas of wasteland for this purpose. In some cities, members of the community do not receive permission for burials at all. Moreover, there have been severe attacks, often repeated, against Bahá'í cemeteries in more than 25 different localities since 2005. In 2008, for example, a cemetery near Ghaemshahr was attacked three times with the graves repeatedly desecrated; officials returned to the same

¹⁶ See the report by the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing in 2006, after his country visit to Iran (E/CN.4/2006/41/Add.2): <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Housing/Pages/CountryVisits.aspx>

¹⁷ Photos can be found at: <http://news.bahai.org/story/780> ; <http://news.bahai.org/story/782> ; and <http://www.iranpresswatch.org/post/6219/screen-shot-2010-07-17-at-12-10-50-pm>

cemetery in January 2009 and razed it. Virtually every Bahá'í cemetery in the country has been vandalized or desecrated, and at least two were fully demolished. Vandals have attacked Bahá'í cemeteries with total impunity, destroying graves and causing extensive damage in April 2010 in Gilavand, May 2010 in Mashhad, June 2010 in Isfahan and in Boroujerd, July 2010 in Jiroft, and several more locations since then. The latest destructions are reported in our UPR implementation document (attached).

And when Bahá'ís in some localities had worked for years to transform their allotment of barren wasteland – removing rocks, replacing soil, digging wells, planting and watering trees by hand – the authorities decided to confiscate the cemetery that had become a beautiful park and to destroy all the graves once again. One particularly serious recent case concerns Sanandaj, see <http://news.bahai.org/story/881>.

6. Denial of the right to work (and earned pensions)

Since 2004, the Iranian government has been carrying out a systematic campaign to deny Bahá'ís the right to employment. In many hundreds of cases, the authorities have taken measures to make it impossible for those 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 (Tehran, 9 April 2007) gave orders to the commanders of police and heads of intelligence and security throughout its province. Members of the “perverse Bahaist sect” (as well as members of “anti-revolutionary political organizations” and other illegal groups) were to be prevented 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 any other “high-earning businesses”.¹⁸

In addition, henceforth a form had to be filled out and signed by all who apply for business licences, requiring the applicant to declare his/her religion and undertake to:

...adhere to and uphold the moral principle of the law and regulations of the Public Places Supervision Office and the laws and authority of the Islamic Revolution... [and accede that] ...in the case of the slightest wrongdoing, the [same] Office has the authority to impede my activity without adhering to any legal or administrative proceedings, and I, consequently, do not have grounds for any objections.

In this manner, the authorities attempt to deny legal recourse to those targeted by discriminatory regulations.

¹⁸ A copy of this April 2007 letter (in Persian original and English translation) can be found on pages 86-87 of *The Bahá'í Question – Cultural Cleansing in Iran*, which can be downloaded in electronic form at: <http://news.bahai.org/human-rights/iran/the-bahai-question.html> or obtained in a bound edition from Bahá'í International Community representatives.

In 2006 and thereafter, various trade associations, unions and business organizations were instructed to compile lists of Bahá'ís in every type of employment. Identification has been 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 stop all business dealings with companies and independents 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 Bahá'ís 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, raiding and even vandalizing Bahá'í-owned stores
- and closed many Bahá'í-owned businesses, sealing the premises

Abuses occurred throughout the country, in over 40 different localities. In one case, an official informed the Bahá'í owner of a store in Hamedan (operated by his family for 48 years) that licenses for grocery stores would no longer be issued to Bahá'ís, and the owner requested confirmation in writing. The official replied, “Wherever you go, even to the United Nations, you will end up here, where you will get the same clear answer.” Then the official added that, if the Bahá'í wanted a license, he could change his religion.

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 many Bahá'ís have launched private enterprises over the years because they and other members of the community could not obtain employment in Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution, all members of the community have been banned from work in the public sector. In the 1980s, over 10,000 Bahá'ís were dismissed from positions in government, education, health care, etc., and never received unemployment benefits. Pensions were terminated, as well. Some of those deprived of their rightfully earned pensions attempted to pursue legal remedies, but the courts have systematically ruled against them. Copies of court decisions in such cases explicitly state: “payment of pension to those individuals connected with the baha'i sect is illegal” [or an “unlawful act”].

Bahá'í farmers are also affected. Agricultural land owned by members of the community has been confiscated; trees have been uprooted in Bahá'í-owned orchards; crops have been destroyed, livestock slaughtered, and Bahá'í farms forced to shut down.

The intergovernmental body most concerned with the right to employment is the International Labour Organization (ILO). Its Committee of Experts has repeatedly

referred to Iran's Bahá'ís in its reports, expressing concern about discrimination in the areas of vocational education and employment against “members of unrecognized religions, in particular the members of the Baha'i faith”. At the 2006 ILO Conference, statements about discrimination on the basis of religion in Iran focused almost entirely on the Bahá'ís, and the relevant extract in the Provisional Record ran to nearly four pages.¹⁹ Recurrent violations against Bahá'ís – and the fact that the government had taken no measures to comply with ILO recommendations in this regard – were again noted with concern by the organization in 2008, 2009,²⁰ 2010 and 2011.²¹

In its report for the June 2013 Conference, the ILO Committee of Experts included the following segment about the Bahá'ís of Iran:

Noting the general information provided by the Government regarding measures taken to benefit certain ethnic and religious groups, the Committee notes with **deep concern** that the Government does not address the very serious concerns that have been raised for many years regarding discrimination against unrecognized religious minorities, in particular the Baha'i and the urgent need to take decisive action to combat such discrimination. The Committee recalls the concerns raised by Education International (EI) regarding religious-based discrimination against the Baha'i in access to education, universities and to particular occupations in the public sector. The Committee notes that the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran acknowledges that “Baha'is are subjected to severe socio-economic pressure ... in some cases, they have been deprived of property, employment and education”. He also refers to the establishment of an office to counteract Baha'i publications, the denial of positions of influence to Baha'i and prohibiting them from carrying out certain trades. He also states that ethnic minorities “continue to be subjected to intense socio-economic discrimination and pressures, including land and property confiscation, denial of employment and restrictions on social, cultural and linguistic rights” (A/HRC/19/66, 6 March 2012, paragraphs 61–62). The Committee notes further that the Special Rapporteur states that the practice of *gozinesh*, a selection procedure requiring state officials and employees to demonstrate allegiance to the state religion, has further alienated ethnic minorities (ibid., paragraph 65). ***The Committee must once again urge the Government to take decisive action to combat discrimination and stereotypical attitudes against religious minorities, in particular the Baha'i, through actively promoting respect and tolerance for religious minorities, to repeal all discriminatory legal provisions, including regarding the practice of gozinesh, and withdraw all circulars and other government communications discriminating against religious minorities. The Committee also calls on the Government to ensure that religious minorities, including unrecognized religious minorities, in particular the Baha'i, as well as ethnic minorities, are protected against discrimination, and have equal access and opportunities, in***

¹⁹ These discussions took place at the ILO Conference sitting on 15 June 2006. The text can be accessed at (see bottom of page 41 to page 44):

<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc95/pdf/pr-24-part2.pdf>

²⁰ The 2009 Conference segment on Iran can be found in the Provisional Record at:

http://www.ilo.org/global/What_we_do/Officialmeetings/ilc/ILCSessions/98thSession/pr/lang--en/docName--WCMS_108378/index.htm see pp. 99-106.

²¹ See [http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-](http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/pdconv.pl?host=status01&textbase=iloeng&document=12393&chapter=6&query=Iran%40ref&highlight=&querytype=bool&context=0)

[lex/pdconv.pl?host=status01&textbase=iloeng&document=12393&chapter=6&query=Iran%40ref&highlight=&querytype=bool&context=0](http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/cgi-lex/pdconv.pl?host=status01&textbase=iloeng&document=12393&chapter=6&query=Iran%40ref&highlight=&querytype=bool&context=0)

*education, employment and occupation, in law and practice. The Committee asks the Government to take concrete measures to this end, and to provide detailed information of the measures taken and the results achieved. (...)*²²

7. Denial of civil rights and liberties

Bahá'ís have no legal protection in Iran and thus their civil rights can be ignored with impunity. In nearly all routine civil procedures for which a form must be filled out, Iranian citizens must identify their religious affiliation.

The freedom of Bahá'ís to travel outside or inside Iran is often impeded and sometimes denied. Bahá'ís have had their passports confiscated when attempting to travel abroad, and some have been placed on “no fly” lists. More Bahá'ís have been given passports in recent years, but there has been no official change of policy. Bahá'ís abroad still find some Iranian embassy officials uncooperative. Requiring applicants to declare affiliation with a “recognized” religion on passport application forms has been used to pressure Bahá'ís to recant their beliefs.

Measures taken by the government in 2000 enabled married Bahá'í couples to register as husband and wife and to register their children, but the law was not changed, so Bahá'í marriages and divorces are not legally recognized. In June 2011, we heard that an announcement had been sent to official marriage bureaus in Shiraz, prohibiting them from performing a marriage ceremony for a Bahá'í and Muslim couple. It threatened the bureaus with closure if they do not follow these instructions. Finally, as mentioned above, the right to inherit property is denied to Bahá'ís.

8. Incitement to hatred based on religion or belief

The upsurge in human rights violations against Bahá'ís in Iran over the past eight years was both preceded and accompanied by efforts to incite hatred, distrust, intolerance and even violence against them. Some officials have openly encouraged the persecution, and some members of the clergy have preached sermons against the Bahá'í Faith and its adherents. National and provincial budgets have included allocations for “educational” programmes to “confront” the Bahá'í Faith, and official organs have been established, dedicated to that purpose. This is incitement to hatred, institutionalized.

In October 2011, the Bahá'í International Community documented over 400 published instances of incitement to hatred over a 16-month period, in a report available at: <http://news.bahai.org/story/861>. These concerned not only print and online media but

²² For the full text, see http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_205472.pdf

also seminars, conferences, workshops, exhibitions, national TV and radio series and programmes, software data bases, and at least two websites entirely dedicated to combating the Bahá'í Faith. In all cases, the disseminations were sponsored and/or approved by the State. Media regularly attacking the Bahá'ís include:

- Kayhan, one of Iran's oldest daily newspapers, government-backed and managed by a representative of the Supreme Leader at the Kayhan Institute; Kayhan articles later appeared in at least a dozen government-affiliated websites including Iran Press News and Raja News, as well as in published books.
- Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), the official government agency
- Javan Online, affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – articles published by Javan regularly appear, as well, on a dozen other government-affiliated websites including Mehr News.
- Jahan News, a government-affiliated news agency – some of its anti-Bahá'í articles have been picked up by over 30 other government-affiliated websites including Shiah Online, ATY news, Raja news and Khabar online.
- Fars News, a government-affiliated news agency
- Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA), an official government organ
- Iranian Quran News Agency (IQNA), a government-affiliated agency
- Islamic Development Organization (IDO), a government-affiliated website
- Tabnak News Agency, another government-affiliated agency
- Rasa News, a news agency operated by clerics in Qom
- Bahatism News, a website dedicated to publishing attacks against the Bahá'ís that have appeared in various State-controlled media.

They present a wide range of totally false allegations. In some cases, lies and misrepresentations distort history, grossly malign Bahá'í moral principles and vilify both the Bahá'í Faith and its adherents, using malicious or vile language and innuendo. In other cases, Bahá'ís are falsely accused of espionage, conspiracy, instigating sedition and other illegal, anti-regime activities that threaten national security.

Incitement to hatred against the Bahá'ís has long been a mainstay of campaigns by the government to promote religious orthodoxy. Iran's latest report to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights²³ details at great length the government's extensive efforts "to protect the Islamic-Iranian identity", to promote a specific kind of Islamic "religious knowledge" and "to expand the culture of the Quran". In April 2011, IQNA reported that 30,000 religious discourse meetings had been held during the past year and highlighted efforts to counter "deviant ideologies" such as "Satanism, Bahatism, and other philosophies that claim to be new religions", defined as "the enemy".

²³ E/C.12/IRN/2, see <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/cescrs50.htm>.

We are particularly concerned about incitement to hatred because of subsequent violent attacks and incidents where Bahá'í children and adolescents were subjected to abuse (as reported above) based on slanderous accusations. Members of the community across Iran receive threatening telephone calls, text messages and anonymous letters, and they come across anti-Bahá'í pamphlets and circulars in shops, schools and other public places. In many localities, graffiti are spray-painted in and around Bahá'í cemeteries, houses, shops, orchards and vehicles. Almost always, these secondary sources contain the malicious lies and language found in the government-controlled/affiliated and State-sanctioned media listed above.

It should be recalled that members of the Bahá'í community in Iran have long been denied access to all means of communication with the public. Therefore, they cannot counter the lies and calumny propagated about them and their religion, which in many cases come from those who give the Iranian people guidance in spiritual matters. When Bahá'ís have tried to contact newspapers and other media requesting rights of reply, they have been ignored or even mocked for having thought that they could be granted the means to deny published allegations or to present their point of view – a refusal that is in total contradiction with Article 5 of Iran's Press Law.

Moreover, the government blocks all Bahá'í websites, whether originating from within or outside Iran, and officials have repeatedly acted to deny Bahá'ís access to printing or photocopying. For years, Bahá'í books, leaflets and other publications have been systematically confiscated during house searches, along with photocopiers, computers and printers belonging to individual members of the community. This not only deprives Bahá'ís of the means to produce materials for their own use, but also makes it difficult for them to provide accurate information in response to the propaganda against their Faith.

9. Conclusion

International monitoring constitutes the only protection for this community. Any lessening of international support for Iran's Bahá'ís will be perceived by the authorities as a license to continue violating their rights with impunity. Only when legal and public steps are taken to completely emancipate the Bahá'ís will Iran be able to claim full compliance with its repeated declarations of commitment to human rights.

Outside Iran, the persecution against the Bahá'ís is one of the issues repeatedly denounced by the international community – the United Nations, intergovernmental bodies, and civil society – when condemning Iranian government violations of international human rights standards. For over 20 years, the UN General Assembly has adopted resolutions that refer to violations against minorities in Iran, including the Bahá'ís. Since 2005, eight UN Special Procedures have reported on the abuses detailed

above,²⁴ also presented in the reports on human rights in Iran by the UN Secretary-General in 2010,²⁵ 2011,²⁶ 2012²⁷ and 2013.²⁸

As for the UN treaty bodies: the Islamic Republic did not cooperate with the Human Rights Committee and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights for over 15 years. The government submitted its long-overdue reports to these treaty bodies at the end of 2009, just in time to announce renewed cooperation before its human rights record was examined under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in February 2010. On 17-18 October 2011, the Human Rights Committee criticized Iran's non-compliance with the ICCPR, raising numerous issues of concern, including many questions about the Bahá'ís. The Experts emphasized that as religion and belief have the same status in the ICCPR, Iran must allow Bahá'ís to manifest their beliefs individually and in community with others, in public and in private, even if the authorities do not consider the Bahá'í Faith to be a religion. A section of the Committee's *Concluding Observations* was devoted to the Bahá'ís.²⁹

Furthermore, Iran's treatment of its Baha'i citizens has been repeatedly identified as a major area of concern in publications by international human rights organizations. Of particular note: recent reports issued by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Minority Rights Group International (MRG) and Amnesty International, each focussing on a different issue – minorities, women prisoners, the Middle East in general – and each placing the persecution of Baha'is in that context, demonstrating the interrelated nature of human rights violations. Welcoming these reports, the Bahá'í International Community joined the NGOs in expressing our grave concern about violations directed at other groups in Iran, such as women, journalists, and human rights defenders, as well as ordinary citizens seeking the right to freedom of expression.³⁰

Finally, we would note that the persecution against the Bahá'ís of Iran has been deplored by prominent people in countries throughout the world: Nobel Peace Prize winners, parliamentarians, religious leaders, theologians, academics, business and trade

²⁴ Since 2005, human rights violations against Iranian Bahá'ís have been mentioned in documents submitted to the UN Human Rights Council by the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the Special Rapporteur on torture, the Independent Expert on minority issues, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, and in joint reports by numerous UN Special Procedures on their communications with governments.

²⁵ See <http://news.bahai.org/story/732> and <http://news.bahai.org/story/796>

²⁶ See <http://news.bahai.org/story/858>

²⁷ The 2012 report to the Human Rights Council, A/HRC/19/82, is available at: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/A.HRC.19.82_AUV.pdf

²⁸ See summary of reports by the Special Rapporteur on Iran and the UN Secretary-General in March 2013: <http://news.bahai.org/story/941>

²⁹ All of the related documentation to can be accessed at : <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/hrcs103.htm>

³⁰ See <http://news.bahai.org/story/846>

union representatives, lawyers, judges, writers, artists, filmmakers....³¹ In a feature-length film entitled *Iranian Taboo* released in February 2012, renowned Dutch-Iranian filmmaker Mr. Reza Allamehzadeh independently examined violations of economic, social and cultural rights that specifically target Bahá'ís in the Islamic Republic.³²

We are gravely concerned about the dramatic increase, during the past eight years, in the arbitrary and cruel use of power against the Bahá'ís of Iran. The nature, number and range of incidents give ample evidence of official policy, putting members of the community under severe pressure, attempting to separate them from their friends and fellow citizens, and inciting the population to detest and distrust them.

The Iranian Bahá'ís deeply love their country, despite all the suffering they have endured under successive regimes. They are heartened by growing support among the general population in defence of their rights. The members of this community seek the freedom to serve their country and humankind, at the prompting of the principles and teachings of their Faith. Regardless of the restrictions imposed on them, they do not refrain from discharging their spiritual and social responsibilities. They will always continue to strive, through their participation in constructive discourse with their neighbours, co-workers, friends and acquaintances, to play an important role in the advancement of their homeland.

³¹ Many of these have been documented at: <http://news.bahai.org/human-rights/iran/iran-update/international-reaction.html>.

³² A special screening of the film was presented at a side event during a session of the UN Human Rights Council on 3 July 2012, and it has been shown in cinemas in the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, Switzerland and other countries. For information about its content, see: <http://www.iraniantaboo.com/>.