

Bahá'í International Community

United Nations Office

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

(September 2011 edition)

This report presents the historical and legal background of the persecution that has targeted Bahá'ís in Iran since the Islamic Revolution, and then 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.

The most recent developments are regularly reported online at:

<http://news.bahai.org/human-rights/iran/iran-update/>,

and additional information can also be found at:

http://bic.org/areas-of-work/persecution_bahai_community.

For in-depth background and photos, the 2008 edition of *The Bahá'í Question – Cultural Cleansing in Iran* can be downloaded in electronic form at:

<http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/TheBahaiQuestion.pdf>

or 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 both religious authorities and governing dynasties in Persia – some 20,000 perished in pogroms during the 19th century. The persecution continued intermittently thereafter, generally 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'i establishment the emergence of an independent religion that postdates the Qur'an is theologically abhorrent. Members of the Shi'i 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, government-supported programme to eliminate the Bahá'í community in the country, with a parallel increase in the number, frequency and range of 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 other 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 (as well as by Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then President of Iran), 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 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, and the rights to education and work.

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

1.2 Constitutional issues

Iranian officials quote Articles 14² and 20³ 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.

With over 300,000 members, 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.⁴ Most importantly, Article 13 limits freedom of religious *practice* to recognized religions only. Thus the Constitution strips other religions of this freedom and legitimizes the persecution of individuals who practice those religions. The Islamic regime refers to the Bahá'í Faith as a heresy, a "misguided sect", a cult, or an "illegal association".

Article 26 of the 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".

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 sex or religion, characteristics usually mentioned alongside language, race and colour in this context. In fact, Iran's Constitution does not explicitly recognize the principle of religious non-discrimination. In practice, Bahá'ís do not enjoy equal rights and are subjected to unfair and discriminatory treatment regarding access to higher education, 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 six years, specifically to identify and monitor the activities of all Bahá'ís, as detailed below.

² 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".*

³ 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."

⁴ For example, the Iranian parliament approved a bill in 2003 granting equal compensation in "blood money" to the recognized religious minorities, but a court later ruled that Bahá'ís cannot benefit from this legislation. The government's restricted use of the term "religious minorities" was clearly stated in 2010 in Iran's reports to the UPR and the UN Human Rights Committee.

2. Denial of right to organize as a peaceful religious community

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 governing councils 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, the right to assemble and to maintain its institutions. And no Bahá'í community centres are permitted in Iran.

As a result, Iranian 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 Iranian 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, Iran's Bahá'ís 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 informal groups. But early in 2009, the government declared **all** Bahá'í administrative arrangements illegal.⁵ The Bahá'ís again agreed to demonstrate their goodwill and ceased the collective functioning of the informal administrative groups. 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

By the time the government's declaration appeared in the media, the community's former leaders – seven Bahá'ís who had constituted the informal group administering the affairs of the community at national level – had been arrested and then arbitrarily detained for nearly ten months.⁷ All seven were subjected to intensive interrogations and ill-treatment while in custody. Moved out of solitary confinement in September 2008 but repeatedly denied release on bail, they were detained in section 209 of Evin prison in Tehran for over two years. The first session of their trial took place in January 2010, with further sessions in April and June. The judiciary adamantly resisted appeals for the

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. For the Persian original of one of the official press releases, see <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8711271271>.

⁶ A copy of the 2009 letter can be found at: <http://bic.org/areas-of-work/persecution/prosecutor-general-iran-en.pdf>, for the 2010 letter, see <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 had been arrested on 5 March 2008 while in Mashhad and later transferred to Tehran; the six others had been arrested on 14 May 2008 at their homes in Tehran.

trial to be held in open court, while at the same time violating the rules for closed hearings by allowing intelligence officials and their camera crews to be present and to film the proceedings. The trial ended on 14 June 2010.

In his report to the UN General Assembly about Iran in 2010, the UN Secretary-General devoted a section to this case, in which he stated *inter alia*:

31. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights wrote to the authorities on several occasions to express concern and seek clarification about the status of the seven members of the Baha'i community (...) whose trial began on 12 January 2010 (...). The High Commissioner requested the authorities to allow independent monitoring of such high-profile trials, but this request was not granted. (...) The High Commissioner, through a number of letters, expressed deep concern that in the absence of any independent observers, these trials did not meet due process and fair trial requirements. The High Commissioner voiced grave concern that the criminal charges brought against the above-mentioned individuals appeared to constitute a violation of the Islamic Republic of Iran's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, in particular those of freedom of religion and belief and freedom of expression and association. (...)

[A/65/370, 15 September 2010, page 11]

In its verdict in August 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 ruling in September 2010 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 the court still presented as illegal the religious beliefs of the former leaders and their service to the Bahá'í community. On that basis, its ruling reduced their sentences to 10 years of imprisonment.

In March 2011, we heard that the original 20-year sentences had been reinstated following a challenge by the Prosecutor General against the ruling on appeal. A provision of the Iranian legal system allows the Prosecutor General to appeal to the Head of the Judiciary against any judgement by a court that is deemed to be in contradiction with Shariah law.

Despite repeated requests, neither the Bahá'ís nor their attorneys have ever received an official copy of the original verdict, the ruling on appeal, and the most recent judgement rescinding the appeals court ruling. The authorities also refuse to provide prison officials with the documentation required to obtain temporary leave on compassionate grounds and the medical care that these prisoners need. In other words, due process is again being denied during the post-trial period.

While the case was on appeal, the former leaders were again denied release on bail, and all seven were transferred to Gohardasht/Rajaishahr prison, notorious for its brutally harsh conditions. The five men are still imprisoned there; the two women have been moved twice and are now back in Evin prison in Tehran.

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.

3. Denial of the right 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 since then.

In March 2006, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief expressed her grave concern about a letter sent in October 2005 by the Chairman of the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces in Iran⁸, addressed to the Ministry of Information, the Commanders of the Revolutionary Guard, *Basij*, Police, Army and others, and copied to the Head of the Judiciary and the Chairman of the 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. The Interior Ministry wrote in August that year to the deputies of the Department of Politics and Security in Offices of the Governors’ General throughout Iran. They were instructed to complete a questionnaire about local Bahá'ís and to “cautiously and sensitively monitor and supervise” all Bahá'í social/educational activities. 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.⁹

From 2006 to the present day, police and Ministry of Information officials (i.e. Iran’s intelligence services, henceforth referred to as the Intelligence Ministry) have interrogated hundreds of Bahá'ís throughout the country. Bahá'ís known to the Ministry were harassed to give details about others. Attempts were made to obtain information through surreptitious means, by people posing as journalists or questioning children in the street. Moreover, officials came to the homes of non-Bahá'í neighbours, questioning and asking them to monitor the Bahá'ís next door. Once they had been identified, Bahá'ís and some of their non-Bahá'í friends of all ages (including children, adolescents and military trainees) 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 during the same period. The authorities cracked down on civil society, academics, women's rights and trade union activists, students, journalists, and participants in peaceful demonstrations. The repression increased after the presidential elections in 2009, and the Bahá'ís were falsely accused of being among the groups responsible for civil unrest and turmoil during that period.

Human rights defenders have been particularly hard hit, as the authorities are also attempting to silence anyone who reports human rights violations to the international community, including any Bahá'ís who do so.

⁸ 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>

⁹ To read the English translation of the August 2006 letter, [click here](#)
To view the original August 2006 letter in Persian, [click here](#)

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 the first serious outbreak in 2005 in Yazd, unknown individuals severely injured two members of the community, set a shop on fire, and demolished the Bahá'í cemetery, smashing tombstones and leaving the remains of the interred exposed.

Attacks later occurred in other localities, and Bahá'ís 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;¹⁰ a few were totally destroyed. Incidents involving arson occurred in series targeting different Bahá'ís in the same town.

The community in Karaj was affected in 2008-2009, and for three years violence has been directed against Bahá'í shops and small businesses in Rafsanjan, 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 in 2009/2010 targeted homes, shops and vehicles belonging to them and their relatives. Incited by incendiary sermons, anti-Bahá'í seminars and rallies, the events suggested an organized campaign 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 also 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.

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, police offer no protection. The attacks are 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 most often 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 470 arrests. And intelligence officers have summoned many hundreds more for interrogation without officially arresting or detaining them: 196 such cases were reported in just one year (2007). 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 and interrogated for months without charge. Among those taken into custody and interrogated (in some cases repeatedly), many

¹⁰ Photos documenting some of these attacks can be found at: <http://news.bahai.org/story/645>.

were members of the informal groups that used to coordinate Bahá'í activities in various towns. Most were detained for weeks or months before being released on bail. 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 and supplies.

Bahá'ís in certain localities have been disproportionately affected by the crackdown since 2005. In Semnan, Shiraz and Tehran, the number of imprisonments has been particularly high, and some have involved ill treatment while in custody.

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 Bahá'ís 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 several verdicts issued in 2011, Iran’s judiciary considers as a criminal offense: “membership in anti-regime groups (the misguided Bahaist sect)”, in other words being a member of the Bahá'í community.

Being a human rights defender is also a criminal offense in Iran. One Bahá'í was sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment in January 2011, specifically: five years for “engaging in human rights activities”; five years for “illegal assembly” (in support of university students deprived of higher education); and two years for “disturbance of the general public’s opinion”. 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 some 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 access 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 those who should hold their trust: their teachers and school administrators. Many pupils have been threatened with expulsion or forced to change schools. Some were pressured to convert to Islam, obliged to use textbooks that denigrate and falsify their religious heritage, or singled out as their Faith was attacked. All who dared to respond were severely reprimanded. In two months in 2007, over 150 incidents were reported from ten different cities. Widespread mistreatment has continued ever since.

In parallel, schoolteachers were being “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 in different cities, 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.

In the most serious case this past year, 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 manner that finally allowed Bahá’ís to take the national university entrance exam without declaring their religion.¹¹ Over 800 Bahá’ís took the exam for academic year 2006-2007; 480 passed; 289 were admitted. One by one, however, those who began their studies were identified as Bahá’ís and expelled – well over half by January 2007 and more since – some during their final semester, just before graduation. The latest case concerns a young physics student expelled on 30 May 2011, after having completed eight semesters on the honour roll and having gained admission to study for a Master’s degree.

Several official documents specify that the expulsions constitute 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.¹² 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.

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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

The 2006 letter stated that the 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 (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”.

Another official letter, from the Central Security Office of Payame Noor University¹³ to its regional branches (dated 2 November 2006), stipulated that:

“...according to the ruling of the Cultural Revolutionary Council and the instructions of the Ministry of Information and the Head Protection Office of the Central Organization of Payame Noor University, Bahá’ís cannot enrol in universities and higher education centres. Therefore, such cases if encountered should be reported, their enrolment should be strictly avoided, and if they are already enrolled they should be expelled.”¹⁴

A related document (dated 17 March 2007) indicated that the security office of one of Payame Noor University's branches had implemented the instructions. It mandated instructions “to prevent the enrolment of the Bahá’í applicants” and “have the names of such applicants submitted to this office”.¹⁵

The government has done nothing to reverse or counter these instructions, implemented throughout the country. For academic year 2007-2008, the application form for technical and vocational institutes included a declaration of religion that explicitly excluded Bahá’ís. Over 1,000 Bahá’í students took the exam for other institutions, but ± 800 of them were later informed that their papers would not be graded, and the reason given in all cases was “incomplete file”. None of those who followed up on this erroneous classification were able to obtain recourse. Only 237 were informed that they could apply for admittance. Fewer still – 121 – were allowed to select a field of study and admitted to universities. By January 2008, over 40 of these students had not been allowed to register or had later been identified as Bahá’ís and expelled.

Meanwhile, official efforts to identify members of the community were applied to bar them from university. Students who took the entrance exam for academic year 2008-2009 had to go to a website to get their results. Those previously identified as Bahá’ís (at school or elsewhere) were transferred to a page with the following URL – note the final letters: http://82.99.202.139/karsarasari/87/index.php?msg=error_bah. There they received the message: “*Error: ‘Incomplete File. Forward correspondence to the Education Assessment Organization c/o P.O. Box 31535-3166, Karaj.’*”

For the token number admitted, expulsions continue. Recent 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 in 2010 on

¹³ According to its website, Payame Noor University is “a state distance-education university with Headquarters based in Tehran, 10 Regional Centers, 130 Study Centers, 126 Study Units throughout the country and 1 Overseas Center.” Dozens of Bahá’í students have been expelled from Payame Noor.

¹⁴ The 2 November 2006 letter can be accessed at:
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 The 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

political or religious grounds includes 17 Bahá'ís. For details, see: <http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2010/12/punishing-stars-dec2010/>

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. Not a single expulsion case has ever been decided in favour of a Bahá'í. In many cases, the courts explicitly referred to the 1991 policy document from the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council.

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 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). In 1998, at least 36 of those involved in BIHE courses were arrested in raids on over 500 Bahá'í homes, and most of the records and equipment were confiscated. Classes continued nonetheless, and so did the government's attempts to stop them, most notably in 2001 and 2003.

During the week beginning 22 May 2011, Intelligence Ministry officers acted simultaneously against Bahá'ís engaged in BIHE courses in cities throughout the country, including Isfahan, Karaj, Sari, Shiraz, Tehran and Zahedan. Forty households were subjected to extensive searches, with confiscation of personal belongings and computers. Nineteen Bahá'ís had been arrested by the end of June (and dozens more interrogated without being taken into custody). Some have been released; those still arbitrarily detained are included in the list of Bahá'ís currently in prison, annexed to this document.

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

5. Confiscation and destruction of community property

Bahá'í holy places, historical sites, administrative centres and other assets were seized after the 1979 revolution. No community properties have been returned; many have since been destroyed. The seizure of cemeteries was 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 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 at least three more locations since then.

6. Confiscation of property belonging to individual Bahá'ís

The property rights of individual Bahá'ís are generally disregarded in Iran. Since 1979, officials have confiscated a large number of private and business properties, homes, farms and shops belonging to Bahá'ís throughout the country. Some cases were taken to court, but the judgements have demonstrated that the authorities continue to consider the Bahá'í Faith as an illegal movement and to legitimise human rights violations against Iranians who are members of the community.

Since 2005, there has been a marked increase in the number of summary searches of Bahá'í homes during which personal belongings have been seized. Nearly all Bahá'ís taken into custody have had their homes raided at the time of their arrest. 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.

7. Denial of employment, pensions and other benefits

Since 2004, the Iranian government has been carrying out a systematic campaign to deny Bahá'ís the right to employment. In hundreds of cases, officials have taken measures to make it impossible for those now known to be Bahá'ís to earn a living, following the identification of members of the community (described in section 3, above). Official documents prove that these abuses are government policy.

In particular, a letter from the Public Places Supervision Office (Tehran, dated 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”.¹⁶

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.

¹⁶ 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 this manner, the authorities attempt to deny legal recourse to those targeted by discriminatory regulations.

In 2006 various trade associations, unions and business organizations were 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 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. In the 1980s, over 10,000 Bahá'ís were dismissed from positions in government and educational institutions, 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 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.¹⁷ Recurrent violations against Bahá'ís – and the fact that the government had taken no measures whatsoever to comply with ILO recommendations in this regard – were again noted with concern by the organization in 2008, 2009,¹⁸ and 2010, as well as in the 2011 report by its Committee of Experts.

8. 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 (in particular those formerly involved in coordinating community activities) 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, it should be noted that the right to inherit property is denied to Bahá'ís.

9. Incitement to hatred based on religion or belief

The upsurge in human rights violations against Bahá'ís in Iran over the past six 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 June 2011, the Bahá'í International Community submitted reports on this issue to the UN Secretary-General and to the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. The reports documented

¹⁷ 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>

¹⁸ 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.

instances of incitement to hatred and intolerance against the Bahá'ís in Iran, from January 2010 to May 2011, contained in:

- over **360** articles in a wide range of print/online media
- **58** seminars, conferences, workshops and symposia
- three documentary TV series and three additional TV programmes
- three radio series
- two software data bases, available online or on CD
- at least two websites entirely dedicated to combating the Bahá'í Faith, and
- five official exhibitions.

In all cases, the disseminations were sponsored and/or approved by the State.

The relevant extracts from the articles and brief descriptions of the events totalled nearly 200 pages. And we were able to report only what had been published in official sources online. Many thousands more have surely appeared in media accessible only inside Iran. Hundreds of defamatory articles have appeared regularly for the past seven years in *Kayhan*, one of the oldest daily newspapers in Iran, which is government-backed and managed by a representative of the Supreme Leader at the Kayhan Institute. Extracts from the *Kayhan* articles later appeared in at least a dozen additional government-affiliated websites including Iran Press News and Raja News, as well as in published books. Other media regularly attacking the Bahá'ís include, for example:

- the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), the official government news agency
- Javan Online, a site 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.

The extracts that we documented 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. On 4 April 2011, IQNA reported that according to the Islamic Propagation Organization, 30,000 religious discourse meetings had been held across the country during the previous year. The meetings were designed to “help youth better understand various religious and social issues” such as the Islamic Hijab, chastity, newly emerging religions and “deviant ideologies”. It was explicitly stated that “deviant ideologies” include “Satanism, Bahatism, and other philosophies that claim to be new religions” and that are engaged in a “soft war” through which “the enemy is trying to push its ideology into the veins of the society at large.”

State-sponsored media also recently announced the opening of numerous “Quranic training centres” – 450 in Kerman, 227 in Hamadan – following a decision announced in October 2009 to establish 3,000 such institutes in Iran. The same media often repeat that Muslim youth have not been educated about the “misguided Bahaist sect”, a sentiment expressed by many Friday prayer leaders and officials who hold government positions. There have long been Quranic institutes in Iran, but the government-controlled media has recently begun publically explaining the role of these institutions in combating the Bahá’í Faith.

We are particularly concerned about incitement to hatred and intolerance because of the violent attacks and the 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.

10. 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, half a dozen UN Special Procedures have reported on the abuses

detailed above,¹⁹ also summarized in the reports on human rights in Iran submitted by the UN Secretary-General to the General Assembly in 2009 and 2010.²⁰

As for the UN treaty bodies: in 2003, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) took note “with concern of the reported discrimination faced by certain minorities, including the Bahá’ís, who are deprived of certain rights”, and said that provisions of Iran’s legislation “appear to be discriminatory on both ethnic and religious grounds”. 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.

We are gravely concerned about the steady increase, over the past six years, in the arbitrary and cruel use of power against the Bahá’ís in Iran. The nature, number and range of incidents give ample evidence of official policy, putting members of the community under severe pressure, attempting to disengage them from their friends and fellow citizens, intimidating people they know and inciting the population to detest and distrust them.

The Iranian Bahá’ís deeply love their homeland, 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 (recently exemplified by an Iranian living in the country who courageously launched a weblog in defence of the Bahá’ís). 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 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 nation.

¹⁹ 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 freedom of religion or belief, the Independent Expert on minority issues, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression.

²⁰ see <http://news.bahai.org/story/732> and <http://news.bahai.org/story/796>