

**The Bahá'í International Community's  
United Nations Office**

# **BACKGROUND**

## ***Nature of the Persecution against the Bahá'ís in Iran***

**February 2010 edition**

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This background document briefly presents the historical and legal context of the persecution that has targeted Bahá'ís in Iran since the Islamic Revolution, as well as re-examining 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 listed below.

The most recent developments are regularly reported in our *UPDATE* document. Additional information can also be found on our website, [http://bic.org/areas-of-work/persecution\\_bahai\\_community](http://bic.org/areas-of-work/persecution_bahai_community) and at: <http://news.bahai.org/human-rights/iran/iran-update/>. For more in-depth background, 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 a bound edition from Bahá'í International Community representatives.

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

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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 19<sup>th</sup> century. The persecution continued intermittently thereafter, generally increasing when governments felt the need to shore up support with Islamic leaders.

Still today, 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 Muslim clerics. In addition, for Iran's Shia establishment (and some of their Sunni Muslim counterparts in Iran and elsewhere) the emergence of an independent religion that postdates the Qur'an is not only theologically abhorrent but also threatens a system of patronage, endowments, influence and perquisites. Members of the Shia 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 number, frequency and range of human rights violations against Iranian 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 government banned the Bahá'í institutions (the elected bodies that carry out functions reserved to clergy in other religions). The community's holy places, cemeteries and property have been confiscated, vandalized or destroyed, and discrimination against members of this religious minority is official policy, as explained 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 to many kinds of employment for anyone known to be a Bahá'í.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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](http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5_TheISRCCdocument.pdf)  
English translation: [http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5\\_TheISRCCdocument\\_en.pdf](http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5_TheISRCCdocument_en.pdf)

## **1.2 Constitutional issues**

With over 300,000 members, the Bahá'í community is the largest religious minority in Iran, but is not recognized as such by the authorities. The Islamic regime refers to the Bahá'í Faith as a heresy and a conspiracy, and classifies its followers as "infidels".

Officials quote Articles 14<sup>2</sup> and 20<sup>3</sup> of the Iranian Constitution when claiming that all citizens "enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights". But these constitutional provisions are not considered relevant in cases involving Bahá'ís, because they are restricted by Article 13 – which stipulates that Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are the only *recognized* religious minorities. So when officials in Iran use the term "religious minorities", they mean only those three. Measures to promote the rights of religious minorities do not apply to Bahá'ís. For example, the Iranian parliament approved a bill in January 2003 granting equal compensation in "blood money" to the recognized religious minorities, but a court has since ruled that Bahá'ís cannot benefit from this legislation.

Finally, it should be noted that Article 23 of the Iranian 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 over the past five years, specifically to identify and monitor the activities of all the Bahá'ís, as detailed below.

International monitoring constitutes the only protection for this community. Any lessening of international support for Iranian Bahá'ís will be perceived by the authorities as a license to continue violating their human rights with impunity. Only when legal and public steps are taken to establish the complete emancipation of the Bahá'ís will Iran be able to claim full compliance with its oft-stated commitment to universal human rights.

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

Since 1983, the Bahá'í community in Iran has been denied the right to assemble officially and to maintain its institutions. 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. In other countries, these democratically elected governing councils organize and administer the religious activities of the community. In Iran, they are banned.

As a result, Iranian Bahá'ís have made arrangements to worship in small groups, have classes for children, study and discuss their Faith, and take care of other community needs in their homes. Years ago, officials would harass them, disrupting meetings, arresting teachers and adult participants, giving them suspended sentences to be

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<sup>2</sup> 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."

<sup>3</sup> 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."

carried out should they again commit the "crime" of giving religious instruction in a private home. With the increased oppression during the past five years, Bahá'ís have been detained, tried, convicted and sentenced to prison terms (ranging from a few months to several years) solely for having engaged in these collective activities.

The authorities have long attempted to prevent Iranian Bahá'ís from participating in monthly religious gatherings and other group activities. Already in 2004, the authorities intensified their pressure on the community with increased harassment and threats. They ordered the Bahá'ís to suspend all social, educational and community-related activities – in other words, all activities that went beyond the individual observance of religious obligations. For Bahá'ís, however, many of these activities are an integral part of their religious practice.

Because they were not allowed to maintain their institutions, the Iranian Bahá'ís formed small groups (at national and local levels) to coordinate and administer the activities of the community and serve its members on an ad hoc, informal basis. For years, the authorities knew about, monitored and tolerated the functioning of these groups. Early in 2009, however, the government declared **all** Bahá'í administrative arrangements illegal. Following this announcement in the media, the groups disbanded and ceased the work that they had been doing.

The seven former members of the national administrative group were all arrested, and they have been detained in section 209 of Evin prison in Tehran since May 2008<sup>4</sup>. The seven Bahá'í leaders were subjected to intensive interrogations and ill-treatment while in custody. Since September 2008, when they were moved out of solitary confinement, they have been allowed to receive brief weekly visits from their families. The first session of their trial took place in January 2010; for details, see our latest *UPDATE* document.

In other cities and towns, former members of the local groups have also been targeted for arrest, interrogation, arbitrary detention, harassment and intimidation, as described below.

### ***3. Denial of the right to life, liberty and security of person***

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A national effort to identify and monitor members of the Bahá'í community throughout Iran began towards the end of 2005, and official acts of persecution and discrimination have greatly increased since then.

In March 2006, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ms. Asma Jahangir, expressed her grave concern about a "confidential letter sent on 29 October 2005 by the Chairman of the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces in Iran"<sup>5</sup>. It had been addressed to the Ministry of Information, the Commanders of the Revolutionary Guard, *Basij*, Police, Army and others, copied to the Head of the Judiciary and to the Chairman of the Office of the Supreme Leader. Signed by *Basij* Major

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<sup>4</sup> The seven detainees are Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm. All but one of the group were arrested on 14 May 2008 at their homes in Tehran. Mrs. Sabet was arrested on 5 March 2008 while in Mashhad and later transferred to Evin prison.

<sup>5</sup> 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>

General Seyyed Hossein Firuzabadi, the letter refers to “the misguided sects of Bahatism 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.”

Towards the end of July, Amnesty International issued a statement about the letter and provided the opportunity to obtain a copy.

We later heard about governmental implementation orders sent out in 2006. For example, the Ministry of the Interior wrote in August that year to the provincial deputies of the Department of Politics and Security in Offices of the Governors’ General throughout Iran. These officials were instructed to complete a questionnaire about local Bahá’ís and to order “relevant offices to cautiously and sensitively monitor and supervise” all Bahá’í social/educational activities. Detailed information was sought: places of residence, occupations, education, the names of all the members of each family, how they related to their Muslim neighbours and colleagues, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

From 2006 to 2009, police and officials of the Ministry of Information (i.e. Iran’s intelligence services, hereafter referred to as the Intelligence Ministry) interrogated hundreds of Bahá’ís in over 20 cities and towns. Some officials came to Bahá’í homes and workplaces; others summoned them to come in for questioning. Bahá’ís known to the Ministry were harassed to give information about others. Attempts were also 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, seeking information and asking them to monitor the Bahá’ís next door.

In parallel, the persecution increased throughout the country. Bahá’ís and some of their non-Bahá’í friends of all ages, including children, adolescents and military trainees, were subjected to physical assaults, harassment and intimidation. Details are given in other sections below.

Of course, other groups have also suffered during the same period. The authorities cracked down on civil society, as well, targeting in particular academics, women’s rights and trade union activists, students, journalists, and participants in peaceful demonstrations.

The repression has greatly increased since the Presidential elections last year. Recently, the Bahá’ís were falsely accused of being among the groups responsible for the civil unrest and turmoil (for information about those arrested in this context, see our *UPDATE* document). 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, of course, any Bahá’ís who do so. As a result, we have found it increasingly difficult to obtain information from Iran at a time when abuses are ever more frequent and widespread, and this has affected our ability to provide comprehensive reports to UN human rights mechanisms.

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<sup>6</sup> 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**

At the beginning of the period under review in this document, we were outraged to hear about the death of Mr. Dhabihu'llah Mahrami in his prison cell (in December 2005).<sup>7</sup> This occurred at a time when a major media campaign had begun, vilifying the Bahá'í Faith and its adherents. There had already been some physical violence, including a serious outbreak in early 2005 in Yazd – the city where Mr. Mahrami was imprisoned – during which unknown individuals severely injured two Bahá'ís, set a shop on fire (destroying all the merchandise), and demolished the Bahá'í cemetery, smashing the tombstones and leaving the remains of the interred exposed.

Attacks later occurred in other localities, as well, including a kidnapping that strongly suggested support from the authorities. In February 2007, two Bahá'í women were murdered in separate incidents. While the motive remains unknown, both were elderly women, and both were brutally assaulted. During the same period, Bahá'ís throughout the country faced harassment and intimidation from officials, anonymous callers and plainclothes agents. Some received death threats, were physically assaulted or evicted from their homes. Bahá'í cemeteries, homes and vehicles, farms, orchards, shops and other workplaces were attacked, damaged, defaced with graffiti.

Incidents involving arson and vandalism have greatly increased, often occurring in series targeting a number of Bahá'ís in the same town. Most recently (2008-2009), this kind of violence has been aimed at Bahá'ís in Rafsanjan and Karaj. In Semnan, after a series of arrests and house searches in December 2008 had clearly identified local Bahá'ís, repeated attacks in 2009 targeted the homes, shops and vehicles belonging to them and their relatives. The recurrent and systematic nature of the violence strongly suggests an organized campaign, intended to compel all known Bahá'ís to leave Semnan.

It is very difficult for members of the community to obtain recourse in such cases, as the police either do not investigate or do not seem able to find the perpetrators. The attacks are condoned by religious authorities and committed with total impunity.

Officials tend to say that the Iranian people consider Bahá'ís as infidels and wish to attack them. On the contrary, it has been the experience of the Iranian Bahá'í community that many of their fellow countrymen respect and admire Bahá'ís for their ideals, good character and steadfastness. Negative attitudes are much more 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 there were five Bahá'ís in Iranian prisons in 2001, four in 2002-2003, and only two arrested in 2004. Then the persecution began to intensify again. In the five years from late 2004 to the end of 2009, there were 268 arrests, and the number of arbitrary imprisonments continues to rise.

In addition, it should be recalled that police and Intelligence Ministry officials have summoned many hundreds more for interrogation without officially arresting or detaining them: 196 such cases were reported in just one year (2007). Since then, as mentioned above, it has become increasingly difficult to obtain detailed, confirmed information from Iran about all but the most grievous cases of arbitrary detention.

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<sup>7</sup> In the mid-1990s, Mr. Mahrami faced trial solely on the grounds of being an "apostate" for believing in the Bahá'í Faith, and he received a death sentence, commuted in 1999 to life imprisonment. He received death threats in prison on more than one occasion. He was 59 years old, had no diagnosed health concerns, and the cause of his death is still not known.

As of 3 January 2010, 48 Bahá'ís were being held in Iranian prisons and detention centres. Details concerning the latest cases and cumulative figures can be found in our *UPDATE* document.

Recently, more of those detained were held in section 209 of Evin prison in Tehran – a section reportedly controlled by Iran's Intelligence Ministry – where detainees are sometimes kept in solitary confinement and interrogated for months without charge. However, Bahá'ís have been arrested in localities throughout the country.

Among those taken into custody and interrogated (in some cases repeatedly) were many former members of the ad hoc administrative groups that used to coordinate the social, educational and other community activities of Bahá'ís in various towns. Most were detained for periods ranging from one day to several weeks or even months before being released on bail. Bail demands have been very high, requiring some families to hand over deeds to property, business or work licences. In nearly all cases, the homes and/or places of business of the detainees have been searched and personal belongings confiscated, in particular books, photos and materials related to the Bahá'í Faith, copying machines, computers and supplies.

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

In May 2006, authorities in Shiraz arrested 54 young Bahá'ís who had been engaged (together with some of their Muslim friends) in an educational programme for underprivileged children. One was cleared and released the same day, 50 were arbitrarily detained for five or six days, and the remaining three for one month. In August 2007, the entire group was charged with “indirect teaching” of the Bahá'í Faith, despite statements signed by Muslim participants attesting that they had been unaware of any such “teaching”, and despite the court’s acknowledgement that the “teaching” materials contained no mention of the Bahá'í Faith. Three of the accused were sentenced to four years of imprisonment,<sup>8</sup> the 50 others to one year in prison, suspended if they attended classes organized by the Islamic Propaganda Organization. In June 2008 an Iranian official re-examined the cases and exonerated all of these Bahá'ís, but no action has been taken to overturn a verdict based on false accusations against them.

Responding to pressure from the international community, the Iranian authorities have not sentenced any Bahá'ís to very long prison terms in recent years. Recent sentences have ranged from a few months to several years, and some have been condemned to additional time in internal exile.

The latest arbitrary arrests and detentions are regularly presented in our *UPDATE* documents (available through our website at <http://bic.org/areas-of-work/persecution/bic-documents#updates>).

Further details can also be found at: <http://www.bahai.org/persecution/iran>

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<sup>8</sup> Ms. Haleh Roohi, Ms. Raha Sabet and Mr. Sasan Taqva have been imprisoned since 19 November 2007 at the Intelligence Ministry’s detention centre in Shiraz, even though the Ministry does not have the right to imprison citizens under Iranian law (only to detain them for interrogation). The conditions there are very harsh, totally unacceptable for long-term imprisonment. They have obtained “temporary releases”, but (to date) they have always had to return to the detention centre to serve out their prison terms.

## **4. Denial of access to education**

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### **4.1 Elementary and secondary schools**

We find it intolerable that Bahá'í children and adolescents are being subjected to harassment, vilification and severe psychological pressure in primary, middle and high schools throughout Iran – and these abuses are being committed by those who should hold their trust: their teachers and school administrators.

Many students have been threatened with expulsion or forced to change schools. Some were pressured to convert to Islam, told they are apostates (punishable by death in Iran), or obliged to use authorized textbooks that denigrate and falsify their religious heritage. Many were singled out or called to the front of the classroom as their Faith was vilified, and all those who dared to respond were severely reprimanded. In the most violent cases, Bahá'í students were abducted, accosted and/or beaten (by adults) on their way to or from school. The extent and remarkably similar nature of the cruel abuses make it clear that this is an organized effort. In only two months, January/February 2007, over 150 incidents were reported from ten different cities. Widespread mistreatment has continued ever since. From October 2008 to February 2009, we received reports of well over 100 incidents in a dozen different localities.

In 2007, the Ministry of Education introduced a new high school registration form with a section on religion. Some teachers strongly urged Bahá'í students not to declare their religion on this form. Those who did – and others who identified themselves as Bahá'ís in other ways, for example by correcting misrepresentations of their Faith in class – have since been refused registration or expelled from their schools.

In parallel, schoolteachers were being “educated” about the Bahá'í Faith. The materials provided for them perpetuate the same falsifications that have been disseminated since the early days of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran – and are remarkably similar to the defamatory propaganda in the media (described in section 9, below).

For at least three years, anti-Bahá'í leaflets have been distributed in schools in different cities, and efforts have been 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 was 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. The entry for *Religion* listed only four options: “Christian”, “Jew”, “Zoroastrian”, and “Perverse Bahaist sect”.

### **4.2 Higher education**

Members of the Bahá'í Faith continue to be 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 adherents of this religion. All the Bahá'í students who have appealed against their expulsions with relevant authorities, and/or through the courts, have seen their cases rejected and dismissed.

It should be recalled that the government had maintained for decades, as a requirement for entrance to public and private universities in Iran, that Bahá'í students renounce their Faith. The authorities are well aware that Bahá'ís will not do so, as a matter of principle. Because of this, an entire generation was denied access to higher education.

In 2004 and 2005, Bahá'ís were finally able to take the national university entrance exam without having to declare their religious affiliation. Over 800 Bahá'ís did so for academic year 2006-2007; 480 passed the exam; only 289 were admitted. One by one, those who began their studies were identified as Bahá'ís and expelled – over 160 by January 2007.

Several official documents indicate that such expulsions constitute official policy. Chief among these is a communication from the Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, sent in 2006 (the month and day are illegible on the copy obtained). Addressed to 81 Iranian universities, the names of which were listed, the letter explicitly instructed them to expel any student discovered to be a Bahá'í, at the time of enrolment or during his/her studies.<sup>9</sup> To enrol, all students were required to fill out forms that included a declaration of religion, and during the academic year university authorities asked students to identify their religion.

The letter stated that the instructions were being promulgated under the provisions of “decree number 1327/M/S, dated 6/12/69 [25 February 1991]”. This refers to the 1991 memorandum from the Supreme Revolutionary Council mentioned earlier (see page 2). Among its provisions was the directive: “They [Bahá'ís] 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 University<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup>

A related document (dated 17 March 2007) indicated that the security office of one of Payame Noor University's branches had implemented the instructions. The office directed the President of that branch to “give the necessary instructions to prevent the enrolment of the Bahá'í applicants” and to “have the names of such applicants submitted to this office for its use”.<sup>12</sup>

The government has since done nothing to reverse or counter these instructions, which were implemented throughout the country. For academic year 2007-2008:

- The application form for technical and vocational institutes, which had to be filled out to take the entrance exam in these fields, included a declaration of religion that

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<sup>9</sup> The 2006 letter to universities can be accessed at:

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

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

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> The 2 November 2006 letter can be accessed at:

Persian original: [http://info.bahai.org/pdf/payame\\_noor\\_univ\\_memo\\_farsi.pdf](http://info.bahai.org/pdf/payame_noor_univ_memo_farsi.pdf)

English translation: [http://info.bahai.org/pdf/payame\\_noor\\_univ\\_memo\\_english.pdf](http://info.bahai.org/pdf/payame_noor_univ_memo_english.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> The letter dated 17 March 2007 can be accessed at:

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

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

excluded Bahá'ís. (Only three choices were given: Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian; the form explicitly stated that if none of the boxes were marked, the applicant would be considered Muslim.) The form for other institutions of higher education allowed Bahá'ís to register for the exam without declaring a religious affiliation.

- Over 1,000 Bahá'í students took the exam in June 2007. About 800 of them were later informed that their exam papers would not be graded, and the reason given in all cases was “incomplete file”.
- Only 237 of those who took the exam were informed that their marks were satisfactory and they could apply for admittance. Fewer still – only 121 – were allowed to select their field of study and admitted to universities nationwide. By January 2008, of these 121, at least 40 had not been allowed to register or had been identified as Bahá'ís at some later stage and expelled.

Meanwhile, all of the official efforts to identify members of the community generated a simpler way to seal off access to university for those now known to be Bahá'ís. Students who took the national entrance exam for academic year 2008-2009 were instructed to go to a specific website to obtain their results. All those who had previously been identified as Bahá'ís were diverted to a page with the following URL (note the final word): [http://82.99.202.139/karsarasari/87/index.php?msg=error\\_bah](http://82.99.202.139/karsarasari/87/index.php?msg=error_bah), where they received the message: “Error: ‘Incomplete File. Forward correspondence to the Education Assessment Organization c/o P.O. Box 31535-3166, Karaj”.

Many students wrote, appealed, used every available means of recourse, but not a single case has been decided in favour of a Bahá'í. On the contrary, a number of court cases have upheld the government's discriminatory policy. Meanwhile, expulsions continue. Five cases were confirmed in 2009, but – given how difficult it is to obtain information from Iran – we do not know how many more cases may have gone unreported.

We cannot but conclude that the authorities never intended to take the measures required to reverse long-standing policies that continue to block access to higher education for those identified as Bahá'ís. Enrolling a token number can only be seen as a tactic to deceive the international community. Wasting the time and energy of hundreds of young people has put them under serious emotional (and financial) stress, and officials have clearly been using the process as yet another means of identifying adherents of the Bahá'í Faith.

In the late 1980s, members of the community had established the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE), offering classes in private homes, with a number of specialized classrooms, laboratories and libraries scattered throughout the country. The authorities interfered with the functioning of this institution several times and then, in 2004, ordered the Bahá'ís to suspend all educational activities and specifically to close the BIHE and the Advanced Bahá'í Studies Institute.

The Bahá'í Faith places a high value on education. Being denied access to university-level studies is demoralizing, and erosion in educational levels inevitably leads to impoverishment.

Further information on this issue can be found at: <http://denial.bahai.org/index.php> and <http://www.bahai.org/persecution/iran>.

## ***5. Confiscation and destruction of community property***

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Bahá'í cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, administrative centres and other assets were seized after the 1979 revolution. No community properties have been returned, and many have been destroyed. The seizure of cemeteries was particularly painful, as many Bahá'ís were given access only to areas of wasteland for this purpose.

The destruction of the cemetery in Yazd in 2005 has been mentioned above. Other Bahá'í cemeteries were attacked from 2006 to 2009, some demolished, with desecrations reported in 19 different localities. In 2008, a cemetery near Ghaemshahr was attacked three times, and the graves were repeatedly desecrated. Officials returned to the same cemetery on 19 January 2009 and razed it.

In January 2004 a sacred site in Babul was destroyed that had great religious significance to all Bahá'ís: the resting place of Mulla Muhammad-'Ali Barfurushi, known as Quddus.<sup>13</sup> The destruction was carried out with full cooperation from the authorities, despite appeals by local Bahá'ís, who were even prevented from retrieving the sacred remains. In June that year, another holy place was demolished: a house in Tehran related to an important period in the history of the Bahá'í Faith. Following instructions from Ayatollah Kani, demolition took place in the presence of the Ayatollah's sons and Intelligence Ministry officials. The mayor's office received written instructions not to interfere, and reporters discovered that this demolition was included in the list of topics about which they were not permitted to report.

## ***6. Confiscation of property belonging to individual Bahá'ís***

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The property rights of individual Bahá'ís are generally disregarded in Iran. Bahá'í homes are frequently searched and personal belongings seized. Most of those arrested during the past five years have had their homes raided and numerous items confiscated, in particular computers, copying machines, and all books, photos, printed material or other possessions related in any way to Bahá'í activities.

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 demonstrated that the authorities continue to consider the Bahá'í Faith as an illegal movement and to legitimise human rights violations against Iranian citizens who are members of the community.

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

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The Iranian government has been carrying out a scheme – well organized, widespread and systematic – to deny Bahá'ís the right to employment. In hundreds of cases over the past six years, officials have taken measures to make it impossible for Bahá'ís to earn a living, following the implementation of government orders to identify all members of the community. Official documents prove that these abuses are government policy.

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<sup>13</sup> In 1849, Islamic religious leaders killed Quddus (the most holy), the foremost apostle of the Prophet-Herald of the Faith, for refusing to recant his beliefs. His resting place was among the many historic and holy places confiscated by the Iranian authorities during the Islamic Revolution.

One of these documents is a letter dated 9 April 2007, in which the Public Places Supervision Office (Province of Tehran) gave orders to the commanders of police and heads of public intelligence and security throughout its region. The letter specified restrictions to prevent members of the “perverse Bahaist sect” (as well as members of anti-revolutionary political organizations and other illegal groups) from engaging in certain occupations. The orders stipulated that Bahá’ís are to be denied work permits or licences for over 25 kinds of business, specifically listed, and also to be barred from all “high-earning businesses”.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, a form is 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 are attempting to deny legal recourse to those targeted by the discriminatory regulations.

Nationwide efforts to identify all members of the Bahá’í community, which began in 2004-2005, have been detailed above. In 2006 it was reported that the Iranian Association of Chambers of Commerce (*Ettehadíyeye Asnaf*) was compiling a list of Bahá’ís in every trade and employment, and that other trade associations, unions and organizations had been instructed to do so, as well. Identification was followed by action, involving an untold number of officials who:

- closed Bahá’í-owned businesses, refused to issue or renew business licenses, work permits and/or trade membership cards for Bahá’ís in a wide range of sectors;
- 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.;
- 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;
- asked landlords of stores to refuse lease renewals to Bahá’í tenant shopkeepers;
- banned Bahá’ís who were working independently from continuing their activities;
- conducted unexpected inspection visits to workplaces, summoning and interrogating Bahá’ís, raiding and even vandalizing Bahá’í-owned stores.

The systematic nature of this effort can be seen from the fact that, during 2007, such abuses occurred in **41** different localities. In one case, when 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, 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.” If the Bahá’í wanted the license, the official added, he could change his religion.

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<sup>14</sup> 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.

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”].

The intergovernmental body most concerned with the right to employment is the International Labour Organization (ILO). Its Committee of Experts has repeatedly referred to the Iranian Bahá'ís in its reports, expressing concern about ongoing discrimination in Iran, in the areas of education and employment, against “members of unrecognized religions, in particular the members of the Baha’i faith”.

In 2006 the Islamic Republic of Iran was up for scrutiny with regard to ILO Convention 111 on Discrimination, under the organization’s triennial universal review. The Report of the Committee of Experts submitted to the ILO Conference that year again referred to discrimination against the Bahá'ís, with more detailed recommendations than in the past, and their situation received considerable attention in Plenary at the 2006 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 of the Conference ran to nearly four printed pages.<sup>15</sup>

The recurrent, extensive violations against Bahá'ís in the areas of employment and vocational education – and the fact that the Iranian government had taken no measures to comply with ILO recommendations in this regard – were again evoked by the Committee of Experts and at the ILO Conferences in 2008 and 2009.<sup>16</sup>

## ***8. Denial of civil rights and liberties***

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Bahá'ís have no legal protection in Iran and thus their civil rights can be ignored with impunity. For nearly all administrative procedures, Iranian citizens must fill out forms requiring a declaration of religious affiliation.

The freedom of Bahá'ís to travel outside or inside the country has often been impeded by the authorities and sometimes denied. Bahá'ís have had their passports confiscated when attempting to travel outside Iran, and some of them – in particular those formerly involved in coordinating community activities – have been placed on “no fly” lists. More Iranian 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 their affiliation with a “recognized” religion on passport application forms has been used to pressure Bahá'ís to recant their beliefs.

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<sup>15</sup> 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>

<sup>16</sup> 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](http://www.ilo.org/global/What_we_do/Officialmeetings/ilc/ILCSessions/98thSession/pr/lang--en/docName--WCMS_108378/index.htm) see pp. 99-106.

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 still not legally recognized. The right of Bahá'ís to inherit is generally denied.

## **9. Incitement to hatred based on religion or belief**

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The major upsurge in human rights violations against Bahá'ís over the past five years was preceded and is being accompanied by efforts to incite hatred against them. Some officials openly encourage or condone the persecution, and some members of the clergy preach sermons against the Faith and its adherents. Articles, TV and radio programmes, pamphlets, posters, exhibitions – far too numerous to detail – vilify the Bahá'ís, portraying their religion (and its history) in ways that are clearly intended to be highly offensive to Muslims. In many localities, slogans have been spray-painted in and around Bahá'í cemeteries and on houses, shops, orchards and vehicles belonging to Bahá'ís, including slander such as: “Bahá'ís – mercenaries of Israel”, “Death to Bahá'ís, the mercenaries of America and England”, and “Bahá'ís are *Najes* [unclean]”. Similar falsehoods are widely distributed in anti-Bahá'í letters and pamphlets.

The language used in these attacks is obviously inspired by State-sanctioned media that have distorted history, used fake documents and grossly maligned Bahá'í moral principles. Defamatory articles have appeared regularly for the past six years in *Kayhan*, one of the oldest and most influential daily newspapers in Iran, which is managed by a representative of the Supreme Leader at the Kayhan Institute. Extracts from the *Kayhan* articles have later appeared in other newspapers, on anti-Bahá'í websites and in books.

We are concerned about this incitement to hatred because of the violent attacks and the incidents (reported above) where Bahá'í children and adolescents were subjected to vilification and other abuse, based on widely disseminated slanderous accusations. Bahá'í military trainees have also been harassed, and members of the community across Iran continue to receive threatening telephone calls, text messages and anonymous letters. Almost always, these communications contain the malicious lies published or broadcast through media linked to the government.

As the community is prohibited from using any means of communication with the public, the Bahá'ís have not been able to expose the calumnies coming from those who provide the Iranian people with guidance in spiritual matters.

## **10. Conclusion**

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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 include references to violations perpetrated against minorities in Iran, including the Bahá'ís. Since 2005, half a dozen UN Special Procedures have

reported and condemned the upsurge in oppressive acts detailed above,<sup>17</sup> many of which were also mentioned in the report on human rights in Iran submitted by the UN Secretary General to the General Assembly last year.<sup>18</sup>

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 gradual but steady increase, over the past five 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 underlying 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 populace in defense of their rights. They only 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 their community, they do not refrain in any way from discharging their spiritual and social responsibilities. They continue to strive in the arena of service to their homeland and, through their participation in constructive discourse with their neighbours, co-workers, friends and acquaintances, to play an important role in society’s progress.

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<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> see <http://news.bahai.org/story/732>