

The Bahá'ís In Iran – A Persecuted Community

Since the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, members of the Bahá'í Faith – the largest religious minority in Iran – have been the subject of a relentless campaign of persecution. This persecution has impacted the lives of generations, from young infant to frail elderly. Iranian law and official policy denies Bahá'ís their civil, political, economic and cultural rights to education, work, freedom of religion, freedom from arbitrary detention and others. In the absence of any legal protection within Iran, the international community is morally bound to protect their rights.

Since the early 1980s, over 200 Bahá'ís have been executed or murdered, thousands arrested, detained and interrogated, and tens of thousands more deprived of jobs, pensions and educational opportunities. The community's holy places, cemeteries and properties have been confiscated, vandalized or destroyed; and many individuals have had homes and other property seized or damaged. In 2008, all seven members of Yaran – an ad hoc group tending to the social and spiritual needs of the Bahá'í community in Iran with the knowledge and approval of the government – were arrested. Some 20 months after being imprisoned without charge and less than an hour's access to legal counsel, they were sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. Recently their sentences have been belatedly reduced from 20 years to 10 years, in line with changes to the Iranian Penal Code introduced in May 2013.

Discrimination against Bahá'ís is a matter of official state policy. This policy is summarized in an Iranian government memorandum¹ obtained by the then UN Special Representative on Iran in 1993. Produced in 1991 by Iran's Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and approved by the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, this document, entitled 'The Bahá'í Question', sets forth specific guidelines for dealing with the Bahá'ís. Stamped "confidential", the memorandum was signed by Hujjatu'l Islam Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, Secretary of the Council, and approved by Mr. Khamenei, who added his signature to the document. The memorandum specifically calls for Iran's Bahá'ís to be treated so "that their progress and development shall be blocked."

Furthermore, Iran has so far been reviewed twice under the Universal Periodic Review – a UN mechanism to review the human rights record of all countries – once in February 2010 and again in October 2014. In 2010, Iran accepted a number of recommendations, while specifying that some others were either implemented or in the process of implementation. In the second review in 2014, of the 10 recommendations requested of Iran which specifically dealt with the situation of the Bahá'ís, only two of them were partially accepted by the Iranian government. The Bahá'í International Community, in an analysis of the implementation of those recommendations related to the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran

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

which were accepted by Iran in 2010 as well as 2014, discovered that not a single one pertaining to the Bahá'ís in the country was implemented². By failing to abide by its commitments and assurances made to the international community, Iran has gravely undermined the entire UPR process. In the sections that follow in this report examples are found of different types of persecution which the Bahá'ís in Iran have endured for more than 30 years under the Iranian government.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND HOME RAIDS

In violation of UPR recommendations Rec #138.25, Rec # 138.28 and Rec #138.114:

Since 2004, over 1,000 Bahá'ís have been arrested in Iran, solely because of their beliefs. There are currently some 80 Bahá'ís in prison. In addition, since 2005, intelligence officers have summoned well over 1,000 more for interrogation, without officially arresting them. Members of the Bahá'í community have been arrested in different localities throughout the country and have suffered ill treatment at the hands of governmental officials. Many have been kept in solitary confinement for long periods. Most of those arrested have been detained for weeks or months before being released on bail, and bail demands have been very high, requiring families to hand over deeds to property, and business or work licenses. In nearly all cases, their homes and/or workplaces were searched and personal belongings confiscated, particularly books, photos and materials related to the Bahá'í Faith, computers, copying machines, and supplies; and, in some cases, documents with material value, such as deeds to property.

Below are some examples of recent arrests and home raids:

- On 15 November 2015, following Bahá'í holy days, Intelligence agents raided the houses and workplaces of many Bahá'ís in various cities, as listed below, and arrested 20 individuals. The agents carried warrants that allowed them not only to undertake these searches and arrests, but also empowered them to seek individuals in places of hiding and to arrest anyone that they felt should be arrested. The agents removed items including computers and a variety of documents from the workplaces of these individuals. Below are their names:

A. ISFAHAN: 9

Ms. Zarrin Agha Babaie, Mr. Adib Janamian, Mr. Matin Janamian, Mr. Sahab Rowhani, Ms. Yeganeh Agahi, Ms. Parvin Nik-Aien, Mr. Keyvan Nik-Aien, Mr. Vahid Karami, Mr. Arshia Rowhani.

Note: Mr. Matin Janamian and Mr. Sahab Rowhani, were released after interrogation on the same night at 10:00pm.

In addition, it was reported on 24 November 2015, that 4 people from those who were arrested in Isfahan had been released.

² https://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/pdf/the_economic_oppression_of_irans_bahais_151030.pdf

B. MASHHAD: 5

Ms. Nakisa Hajipour, Ms. Sanaz Eshaghi, Ms. Nika Pakzadan, Ms. Farzaneh Daneshgari, Ms. Naghmeh Zabihian.

C. TEHRAN: 6

Mr. Sahba Farnoush, Mr. Navid Aghdasi, Ms. Negar Bagheri, Mr. Yavar Haghghat, Ms. Helia Moshtagh, Ms. Nava Monjazez.

Note: It was reported on 24 November 2015, that one person from those who were arrested in Tehran had been released.

- In the afternoon of 29 June 2015, eight agents of the Ministry of Intelligence raided the home of a Bahá'í in Tehran and, after confiscating books and other items, arrested him. The individual, who wishes to remain anonymous, was held in solitary confinement in Evin Prison for more than one month. He was visited for the first time on 6 August 2015, with the presence of three guards. In this short visit, the conversation was limited to an exchange of greetings.

ECONOMIC PRESSURES

In violation of UPR recommendation Rec #138.114

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the government has been carrying out a systematic campaign to deny Bahá'ís the right to employment. In many hundreds of cases, the authorities have taken measures to make it impossible for Bahá'ís to earn a living. As of 2007, at least 780 incidents of direct economic persecution against Iranian Bahá'ís have been documented by the Bahá'í International Community. These include shop closings, dismissals, the actual or threatened revocation of business licenses, and other actions to suppress the economic activity of Bahá'ís. This represents a minimum number, given the difficulty of getting accurate information about human rights violations from Iran.

Over the past year, Iranian authorities have intensified their discriminatory policies and practices towards members of the Bahá'í Faith through different measures of economic disruption. In many cities, the authorities sealed Bahá'í-owned shops giving spurious reasons for doing so. On 25 October 2014, agents of the Amaken in Kerman sealed 80 shops of the Bahá'ís in Kerman, Rafsanjan and Jiroft, under the pretext that the shops had been closed during the Bahá'í holy days (23 October and 12 November). Official documents prove that these abuses are not isolated cases but are, in fact, a matter of established government policy.

In particular, a letter from the Public Places Supervision Office (Tehran, 9 April 2007) gave orders to the commanders of police and heads of intelligence and security throughout its province - members of the "perverse Bahaist sect" were to be prevented from engaging in certain occupations. The orders stipulated that Bahá'ís must be denied work permits and licenses for over 25 kinds of specifically-listed businesses, and are barred from any other "high-earning businesses". In addition,

with the adoption of this governmental policy, a form had to be filled out and signed by all who apply for business licenses, requiring the applicant to declare his/her religion. The authorities attempt to actively and pre-emptively deny legal recourse to those subject to mistreatment under discriminatory regulations.

Beginning in 2006 and in the intervening years, various trade associations, unions and business organizations were instructed to compile lists of Bahá'ís in every type of employment. This systematized process of identification has been followed by an untold number of governmental officials committing some, or all, of the following abuses:

- refusing to issue or renew business licenses, work permits and/or trade membership cards to Bahá'ís;
- closing many Bahá'í-owned businesses and sealing the premises;
- issuing instructions to chain stores, government offices and other organizations to avoid purchasing from or stop all business dealings with companies and independents if the owners or managers are Bahá'ís;
- inciting the population to shun Bahá'í-owned businesses;
- instructing landlords of stores to refuse lease renewals to Bahá'í tenant shopkeepers;
- banning Bahá'ís who were working independently from continuing their activities;
- warning private-sector employers against hiring Bahá'ís and/or harassing them to dismiss Bahá'í employees and threatening them with closure of their business if they did not comply. Some of these businesses were shut down; others have been banned from advertising; and
- conducting unexpected inspections of workplaces, summoning and interrogating Bahá'ís, and raiding, and even vandalizing Bahá'í-owned stores.

In addition to the case of 80 Bahá'í shops which were closed in three cities, below are some more recent examples. Of course incidents of economic persecution against the Bahá'ís are ongoing and have, in fact, increased over the past two years.

- In September 2015 the Bahá'í International Community learned that the agents of the Public Places Supervision Office³ in Babol went to a pharmacy in the town and demanded that the owner dismiss from his employment a Bahá'í working there, who had 24 years of pharmaceutical experience, because of his religion.
- In August 2015 it was reported that three young music teachers were summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence Office in Babolsar and interrogated. One of them was told that she was no longer allowed to teach. Permission to continue to work was granted to two of them. However, a few days later they were dismissed by the manager of the institute of music where they were employed.
- In May 2015 the Bahá'í International Community learned that agents of the Public Places Supervision Office sealed off at least 17 shops in the city of Sari because the Bahá'ís had closed their businesses on Bahá'í holy days.

³ [Public Places Supervision Office (Amaken): Reportedly responsible for the enforcement of accepted moral codes in places of work and other offices]

DENIAL OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

In violation of UPR recommendation Rec #138.111

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 Bahá'í community.

The 1991 document, "The Bahá'í Question", produced by Iran's Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, specifically called for Iran's Bahá'ís to be treated so "that their progress and development shall be blocked." The document indicated, for example, that the government aims to keep the Bahá'ís illiterate and uneducated, living only at a subsistence level. The section that defined the "educational and cultural status" of adherents to the Bahá'í Faith includes the instruction:

(...) 2. They 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. (...)

In addition, other government documents have been identified that indicate that this discriminatory treatment represents formal and settled official state policy. Chief among these is a communication sent in 2006 by the Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology and addressed to 81 Iranian universities, the names of which were listed. The letter instructed these universities to expel any student that was found to be a Bahá'í at the time of enrolment or during his/her studies. University enrolment forms include a declaration of religion, and many officials do not allow this declaration to be left blank. Even during the academic year, university authorities have summoned students and demanded that they identify their religion. Whenever a student was identified as a Bahá'í, he or she was expelled.

The authorities are well aware that Bahá'ís, as a matter of principle, will not deny or lie about their religious affiliation. Every year hundreds of Bahá'í students are denied enrolment to universities under the pretext of "incomplete file". These individuals participate in the national examination and receive high scores, making them eligible for entry into university and yet they are denied the right to education only because they are Bahá'ís. For the 2015-2016 academic year, a considerable number of Bahá'í youth who scored high grades in the national examination were either denied entry into university or were expelled during the academic year once it was identified that they are Bahá'ís. Below are some recent examples:

- At the end of the 2015 spring semester, Ms. Dorsa Gholizadeh, a resident of Sari and a university student in architectural studies, was summoned to the Information Office headquarters⁴ and was given the following choices:
 - a. Maintain your belief and be expelled from university,
 - b. Go abroad to continue your studies, or
 - c. Recant your beliefs and continue your studies.

⁴ [Information Office (headquarters): Refers to offices of the Ministry of Intelligence in other government departments]

Ms. Gholizadeh chose the first option and she was expelled from university.

- It was reported in October 2015 that a Bahá'í youth from Payam-e-Nur University in Sari, and another Bahá'í who was studying computer engineering in the Babol University of Science and Technology, were both expelled because of their beliefs.
- It was reported in November 2015 that two Bahá'ís students, who have asked to remain anonymous, both residents of Shahinshahr, were encouraged by an officer of the Office of Intelligence to indicate that they were of the Islamic Faith in order to gain admittance to university. They did not agree to this request.

CEMETERY DESTRUCTIONS

In violation of UPR recommendation Rec #138.221

Historically, cemeteries have played a significant part of the cultural identity as well as historical meaning for the surrounding living community. Scholars agree that these memorial sites are a means of learning the social constructs of a community. The desecration and destruction of Bahá'í cemeteries were methodically executed during post-revolutionary Iran as a means to strip the Bahá'ís of their cultural identity and to erase any ties to the community as a whole.

The seizure of cemeteries has been a particularly cruel form of persecution, 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 different localities throughout Iran since 2005. Vandals have attacked Bahá'í cemeteries with total impunity, destroying graves and causing extensive damage: April 2010 in Gilavand; May 2010 in Mashhad; June 2010 in Isfahan and in Boroujerd; July 2010 in Jirof; December 2012 in Yazd; June 2013 in Abadeh; and December 2013 in Sanandaj. In January 2014, the grave of a Bahá'í buried in the city of Sabzevar was destroyed by a bulldozer. Bahá'ís of the city had to purchase new land in order to rebury the deceased Bahá'í. In March 2014, the Bahá'í cemetery of Ahvaz's metal door was welded shut and a wall was built in front of it. Officials failed even to respect the rights of the deceased Bahá'ís to be buried according to Bahá'í laws: many deceased Bahá'ís from Tabriz and Sanandaj have been buried in the Miandoab and Ghorveh cemeteries respectively, which are at least 160 and 90 kilometres away. From 2013 to 2014, 15 deceased Bahá'ís from Tabriz have been buried in the Miandoab cemetery. In several cases, the families concerned were only informed after the fact that the burials had taken place.

Below are some recent examples:

- On 21 August 2015, the Bahá'í cemetery in Oroumīyeh was vandalised. Approximately 120 flourishing trees that had been growing there for 15 years were cut down. The Bahá'ís in Oroumīyeh, in groups of fifteen, went to the relevant authorities to seek justice and demand that the action of the trespassers be stopped. This action continued for about two weeks, with groups of Bahá'ís each taking a different approach.

- Over the past year and a half, many Bahá'ís have been prevented from burying deceased individuals in the Bahá'í cemetery in Tabriz. Numerous deceased Bahá'ís from Tabriz have been buried in the Miandoab cemetery, which is at least 2 hours' distance from Tabriz, by local authorities who it is presumed are acting under orders from the Ministry of Intelligence. According to Bahá'í burial law, the body of the deceased should not be transported more than an hour from place of death. In several cases, the families concerned were informed only after the fact that the burials had taken place, and their efforts to redress the situation have had no results.
- On 12 July 2015, Mrs. Baji Khanoum Mohammadifard (Sedghi), a Bahá'í from Sanandaj passed away. On the day of the burial, family and friends attending the funeral found military personnel and police officers preventing the burial from taking place. After visiting the relevant authorities the Bahá'ís were told that they had to bury her body in the Ghorveh cemetery, located about an hour and a half's journey from Sanandaj. The Bahá'ís transferred a hand-built cooling system from Kermanshah cemetery to Sanandaj and kept the remains in a workshop in the city. The security official called the son of Mr. Muhammadifard for interrogations in order to find the remains. They explained that recently provisions set out by the Supreme National Security Council, which had been ratified, stated that the Bahá'ís are permitted to have only one cemetery in each province, and that for the province of Kermanshah, Ghorveh has been designated. The Bahá'ís in Sanandaj responded that Sanandaj and Ghorveh are 90 kilometers apart and are linked for the most part by mountainous roads which makes for dangerous travelling. They further explained that it would take more than one hour to accomplish the journey which would go against Bahá'í burial law.

The Bahá'ís continued to visit authorities in order to obtain permission for Mrs. Muhammadifard's burial. During this time, Mr. Muhammadifard's son was again summoned, this time being questioned harshly and threateningly. After four hours of interrogation, he finally revealed the location of the remains. The Bahá'ís, after consulting, decided not to accompany the officials when they transported the body. Finally, the officials came and took the body and buried it in the cemetery in Ghorveh. The Bahá'ís continued following up with the authorities with no result.

PERSECUTION OF CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS

In violation of UPR recommendation Rec #138.110

Children and adolescents known to be Bahá'ís are subjected to harassment, vilification and psychological pressure in primary, middle, and high schools throughout Iran. Often these abuses are committed by their teachers and school administrators. Many pupils have been threatened with expulsion or forced to change schools. In hundreds of incidents, young Bahá'ís were pressured to convert to Islam, obliged to use textbooks that denigrate and falsify their religious heritage, and were singled out as their faith was attacked. Any of the children who had the courage to respond were severely reprimanded. In only two months, January/February 2007, over 150 incidents were reported from ten different cities, and from

October 2008 to February 2009, we received reports of over 100 incidents in a dozen different localities. In parallel, schoolteachers were being “educated” about the Bahá’í Faith, using materials that contain lies remarkably similar to those used in State-sponsored media propaganda constituting incitement to hatred and intolerance. Below are examples of the most recent cases of persecution against children:

- In October 2015, it was reported that Aref Hekmatshoar, a third grade student, was enrolled in a private primary school in Karaj and subsequently expelled by the school principal. Despite efforts being made by the family and two human rights activists to allow him to remain at the school, on 11 October 2015 his parents were forced to enroll him in a new school.
- The following story was reported in April 2015 regarding Dana Jaber, a 13 year old boy in grade seven from Fardis, Karaj. One day his teacher, Mr. Esmailzadeh, informed the class that the Baha’i Faith is useless and that they should avoid it. Dana told his teacher that what he was saying was wrong. He then spoke to the principal about this who told the teacher that school is a place to teach not to speak about religion. Afterwards, the teacher complained to Dana because he had spoken to the principal and since the incident, whenever Dana wants to speak in his classroom, his teacher does not allow him to do so.
- On 24 November 2014 Miss Layli Ziaie defended the Bahá’í Faith to her teacher and was told that she has to move to a new school now that her fellow students know she is a Bahá’í.

INCITEMENT TO HATRED

In violation of UPR recommendations Rec #138.221 and Rec #138.53

The upsurge in human rights violations against the Bahá’ís in Iran since 2005 has been 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 institutionalized incitement to hatred.

Since President Rouhani took office in August 2013, there have been more than 7,000 articles, videos, or webpages appearing in government-controlled or government-sponsored media featuring anti-Bahá’í propaganda. In all cases, the disseminations were sponsored and/or approved by the State. Since January 2015, over 60 influential figures, including clerics, religious figures, academics, editors and government representatives have publicly issued speeches, articles or written declarations against the Bahá’ís. Such statements have been published on websites of various media organizations affiliated with the Iranian government which regularly attack the Bahá’ís. They include Iranian Quran News Agency (IQNA); QudsOnline; Ferghe News; Aftab News; Shabestan News; Basij News; Fars News; Rasa News; Hawzah News.

The materials present a wide range of totally false allegations. Incitement to hatred against the Bahá’ís has long been a mainstay of campaigns by the government to promote religious orthodoxy.

Members of the Bahá'í community across Iran receive threatening telephone calls, text messages and anonymous letters, and they encounter anti-Bahá'í pamphlets in shops, schools and other public places. In many localities, graffiti is spray-painted in and around Bahá'í cemeteries, houses, shops, orchards and vehicles. Without fail, these secondary sources of slander contain the very same malicious lies and incendiary language found in government-controlled, affiliated, and sanctioned media as 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.

Below are some recent examples of incidents involving incitement to hatred:

- Over the course of one month and in the Kerman province, two Friday Prayer Leaders made remarks against the Bahá'í Faith, indicating organization on the part of the authorities. In a speech at the end of November 2014, Hujjat'ul-Islam Abbas Ramezani-Pour, the Friday prayer Imam of Rafsanjan, called for the Bahá'ís to be expelled from the city of Rafsanjan. He also mentioned that according to religious fatwas, Bahá'ís are "unclean" and that it is "forbidden" to conduct business with them. The speech came a few days after an anti-Bahá'í demonstration was held in front of the governor's office in that city. And on 20 January 2015, the Friday Prayer Leader in Jiroft, Hujjat'ul-Islam Reza Karamipour made some defamatory statements about the Bahá'í community, that were subsequently reported in an article hostile to the Bahá'ís posted on the Daqianus website.
- In March 2015 a number of posters against the Bahá'í Faith were displayed in most of Tehran's metro stations. The anti-Bahá'í posters described Bahá'ís as members of a cult devised by imperialist powers, whose aim is to spy and to change the culture and religion of Iranians, specifically Shi'a Muslims.
- It was reported in August 2015 that on 10 July 2015, the last Friday prayer congregation marking the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting (Day of Quds), anti-Bahá'í banners were placed on the walls of Tehran University.
- On 14 February 2015, at 2:30 p.m., while returning home, Mr. Karim Jahandari, approximately 35 years old and a resident of Bandar Abbas, was threatened by two individuals and taken to a secluded area. They blindfolded him and, while threatening him with a gun held to his head, forced him to urinate into a cup and then drink the contents. They subjected him to a beating and verbal abuse whilst threatening him, saying, "just as we sent Mr. Rezvani (a Bahá'í in Bandar Abbas who was murdered in 2013) to hell, we will do the same to you, Mr. Mehran Afshar and Mr. Behzad Rasti." (Mr. Afshar and Mr. Rasti are well known Bahá'ís in Bandar Abbas).

- Owing to the traffic and people passing by, the intruders fled the scene. Mr. Jahandari was advised to immediately file a complaint with the legal authorities, go to the office of provincial governor general, mention the history of the murder of Mr. Ataollah Rezvani, and request protection. The legal authorities promised Mr. Jahandari their cooperation and said they would bring the matter to the attention of Municipal Security Council. Mr. Jahandari was advised to also report the incident to the authorities outside of the province, such as the Office of the President, the Commission for Article 90 of the Parliament, the Ministry of Interior and the Head of the Judiciary, requesting an investigation of the matter.

CONCLUSION

The persecution and discriminatory practices against the Bahá'ís, highlighted above, continue to this day. International monitoring constitutes the only protection for this community and the key factor in protecting the Bahá'ís in Iran. Only when legal and administrative steps are taken to completely emancipate the Bahá'ís will Iran be able to claim full compliance with its repeated declarations of its commitment to human rights.