

***Universal Periodic Review:***

***Iran (Islamic Republic of), February 2010***

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

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This document is presented in annex to the Bahá'í International Community's UPR contribution concerning the Islamic Republic of Iran. It presents the historical and legal context of the persecution that targets Iranian citizens who are members of the Bahá'í Faith, and then focuses on the major upsurge in human rights violations against them since 2005. Links to supporting documentation are provided throughout the text. Additional information can 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/>.

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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 19<sup>th</sup> century. The persecution continued intermittently thereafter, generally increasing whenever 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 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 have been arrested and detained or summoned for interrogation, and tens of thousands deprived of jobs, pensions and educational opportunities. The government banned the Bahá'í institutions. The community's holy places, cemeteries and property were confiscated, vandalized or destroyed, and discrimination against Bahá'ís 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 a 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 gives explicit instructions to ensure that the "progress and development" of the Bahá'í community "shall be blocked." Its provisions include directives denying access to higher education and employment to 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 be obedient to 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.

### **1.2 Constitutional issues**

With some 300,000 members, the Bahá'í community is the largest religious minority in Iran, but is not recognized as such by law. The Islamic regime refers to the Bahá'í Faith as a heresy and a conspiracy.

Officials quote Articles 14<sup>2</sup> and 20<sup>3</sup> of the Iranian Constitution to prove that all citizens "enjoy all human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights". However, these

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<sup>1</sup> The text of the 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)

<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."

constitutional provisions are not enforced in cases involving Bahá'ís. They are restricted by Article 13, which stipulates that Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only *recognized* religious minorities. In fact, when government officials use the term “religious minorities”, it is understood to mean only those three. Although the government claims to promote the rights of religious minorities, such measures do not apply to Bahá'ís. For example, the 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 four years, specifically to identify and monitor the activities of all the Bahá'ís, as detailed below.

Continued international monitoring constitutes the only protection for adherents to this Faith in Iran. Any lessening of international support for the Bahá'í community will be perceived wrongly by the Iranian authorities, as a license to continue violating the human rights of these citizens with impunity. Only when legal and public steps are taken to firmly establish the complete emancipation of the Bahá'ís – and to uphold the rights of all other groups and individuals in the country who are the victims of injustice – will Iran be able to claim full compliance with its oft-stated commitment to universal human rights.

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

Since 1983, the Bahá'í community in Iran has been denied both the right to assemble officially and the right to maintain its institutions. The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy. Its institutions perform many of the functions reserved for 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, conduct classes for children, study and discuss their Faith, and take care of other community needs in their homes. Authorities have often harassed them by disrupting meetings, arresting teachers of children's classes, and giving Bahá'ís suspended sentences to be carried out should they again commit the “crime” of carrying out religious instruction in a private home.

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 (in ways that included threatening individual believers) and ordered the Bahá'ís to suspend all social, educational and community-related activities – in other words, all activities that went beyond the personal, private 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 elect and maintain their institutions, the Iranian Bahá'ís eventually formed small groups (at national and local levels) – with the full knowledge of the government – to coordinate and administer the activities of the community and to serve its members on an ad hoc basis. For many years, the authorities knew about, monitored and allowed these informal groups to function. Early in 2009, however, the government declared **all** Bahá'í administrative arrangements

illegal. Following this announcement and in obedience to the government, the groups ceased functioning.

The seven former members of the national coordinating group have been arbitrarily detained in Section 209 of Evin prison in Tehran since May 2008 without trial and without access to their lawyers<sup>4</sup>. State-sanctioned media maligned Mrs. Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian human rights lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, after it became known that she and her colleagues (at the Defenders of Human Rights Centre) would act as legal counsel for the Bahá'ís. The seven detainees were subjected to intensive interrogations and ill-treatment while in custody last year. Since September 2008, when they were moved out of solitary confinement, they have been allowed to receive brief weekly visits from their families.

In other Iranian cities and towns, former members of the local coordinating groups have also been targeted for arrest, interrogation, short-term detention, harassment and intimidation, as reported below.

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

A national effort to identify and monitor members of the Bahá'í community throughout Iran apparently 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 General Seyyed Hossein Firuzabadi, 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.”

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:

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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. Six members of the group were arrested on 14 May 2008 at their homes in Tehran. Mrs. Sabet was arrested earlier, on 5 March 2008 while in Mashhad, and transferred to Evin prison in May.

<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>

places of residence, occupations, education, all the members of each family, how they related to their Muslim neighbours and colleagues, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

From 2006 to the present day, police and officials of the Ministry of Information (i.e. Iran's intelligence services, hereafter referred to as the Intelligence Ministry) have interrogated hundreds of Bahá'ís in over 20 cities and towns. Some officials came to Bahá'í homes and workplaces; others telephoned or summoned them to their local police station or Intelligence Ministry office. Bahá'ís known to the Ministry were harassed to give personal information about others. Attempts were also made to obtain information through surreptitious means, by people who posed as journalists or questioned children playing in the street. Moreover, officials came to the homes of non-Bahá'í neighbours, seeking the same kind of information and asking some of them to monitor the Bahá'í families next door.

In parallel, the persecution increased throughout the country. Bahá'ís and some of their non-Bahá'í friends (of all ages) were subjected to physical assaults and acts of harassment and intimidation. Individuals who wished to join Bahá'ís in their activities were interrogated and threatened. Details are given in other sections below.

Of course, other groups 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 various peaceful demonstrations.

### **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. Incidents involving arson and vandalism also greatly increased, often occurring in series targeting a number of Bahá'ís in the same town. Bahá'í cemeteries, homes and vehicles, farms, orchards, shops and other workplaces were attacked, damaged, defaced with graffiti.

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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](#)

<sup>7</sup> In the mid-1990s, Mr. Mahrami had been tried and sentenced solely on the grounds of being an "apostate" for believing in the Bahá'í Faith, and sentenced to death. The authorities never bowed to international pressure calling for his release, but in 1999 they commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. He had received death threats in prison on more than one occasion. He was 59 years old, had no known health concerns, and the cause of his death is not known.

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 and other authorities and committed with total impunity.

Most recently (2008-2009), this kind of violence has been repeatedly aimed at Bahá'ís in Rafsanjan and Karaj, and systematic efforts have been made to rid certain smaller localities of their Bahá'í populations (in particular in Abadeh, Aligudarz, Bukan, Hamadan, Ivil, Khorramabad, Laljin, Parsabad, and Ravansar, as well as Asfin and Gaziran in the suburbs of Arak). A more intense campaign of the same nature is currently under way in the small city of Semnan, where Bahá'ís have been subjected to recurrent attacks against their homes and businesses. In December 2008, the homes of some 20 families in this town were raided by Intelligence Ministry agents, just a few weeks after widely-publicized rallies held under the auspices of the clergy, at which the population was urged not to associate with Bahá'ís and not to conduct business with them. Subsequently, the Imam who leads Friday prayers in Semnan called for the Bahá'ís to be expelled from the city through "legal steps". Reports indicate that certain elements are advocating that these tactics be used city by city and without let-up across the country, and that ways be found to increase both the number of Bahá'ís arrested and the economic pressures on them.

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 were arrested in 2004. Then the persecution began to intensify again. Since late 2004, there have been 240 arrests, and the number of arbitrary imprisonments continues to rise. From 6 December 2008 to 1 February 2009, 30 Bahá'ís were arrested and detained. In addition, police and Intelligence Ministry officials have summoned many hundreds of others for interrogation, without officially arresting or detaining them: 196 such cases were reported in just one year (2007).

As of early August 2009, 27 Iranian Bahá'ís were in prison; 109 had been released but were awaiting trial (100 having posted bail); an additional 78 had been tried and sentenced but remained free pending appeal; eight had been cleared or won their appeals, the remainder had lost their appeals and served out their prison terms (four were still serving additional terms of internal exile).

Recently, more of those arbitrarily detained are being held in section 209 of Evin prison in Tehran – a section reportedly controlled by Iran's Intelligence Ministry – where detainees are sometimes held in solitary confinement and interrogated for months without charge. However, Bahá'ís have been arrested in localities throughout the country. For example, the 37 taken into custody between March and May 2005 included six in Shiraz, eleven in Semnan and nine Bahá'í farmers whose homes and land had previously been confiscated in the village of Kata.

Among those arrested (in some cases repeatedly) were many former members of the ad hoc administrative groups that used to coordinate social, educational and other community activities. Most were interrogated and detained, sometimes for only a day or two, sometimes for weeks or 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 Bahá'í books and materials, copying machines, computers and supplies.

Bahá'ís in certain localities have been disproportionately affected by the crackdown since 2005. In 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 of those arrested was cleared and released the same day, 50 were arbitrarily detained for five or six days, and three remained in custody for one month at that time.

In August 2007, the entire group was summoned to receive the court's judgement. All were 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 acknowledgement by the court that the "teaching" materials contained no explicit mention of the Bahá'í Faith. Three of the young Bahá'ís were sentenced to four years' imprisonment.<sup>8</sup> The 50 others were sentenced to one year in prison, suspended for three years, but only if they attended classes organized by the Islamic Propaganda Organization. In June 2008 an Iranian official re-examined the cases and exonerated the Bahá'ís, but no action has been taken to overturn a verdict clearly 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. Since 2005, 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>

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

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

We find it particularly 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 committed by those who should rightfully hold their trust: their teachers and school administrators.

Many pupils have been forced to state their religion and then insulted, threatened with expulsion or dismissed from school. Some were pressured to convert to Islam, told that they are apostates (punishable by death in Iran), or taught Iranian "history" using authorized texts that denigrate and falsify their religious heritage. Many have been singled out or called to the front of the classroom as their Faith was vilified, causing some children to break down in tears. 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.

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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 in principle the Ministry does not have the right to imprison citizens under Iranian law (only to detain them for interrogation).

The extent and remarkably similar nature of the activity infers an organized effort. In only two months, January/February 2007, some 150 incidents were reported from ten different cities. Widespread abuse has continued ever since. From October 2008 to February 2009, we received reports of well over 100 such incidents in a dozen different localities. The psychological trauma involved is incalculable.

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, many schoolteachers were being “educated” about the Bahá'í Faith. The materials provided for them perpetuate the same falsifications of Bahá'í history and teachings used by enemies of the Bahá'ís since their early days in Iran – and are remarkably similar to the defamatory propaganda disseminated through the State-sanctioned media over the past five years.

During 2007-2008, anti-Bahá'í leaflets were distributed in schools in at least three different towns, 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 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 when 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; but only 289 were admitted. One by one, those who did begin their studies were identified as Bahá'ís and expelled, with over 160 expulsions by January 2007. Many of those expelled were told verbally that this had been done because of their religion, but they found it very difficult to obtain written statements to that effect. However, several official documents indicate that the expulsions constitute official policy.

Chief among these is a communication from the director general of the Central Security Office of the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, sent some time in 2006 (the exact 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 who is discovered to be a Bahá'í, whether at the time of enrolment



or in the course of his/her studies.<sup>9</sup> To enrol at these universities, students were required to fill out forms that included a declaration of religion, and during the academic year university authorities frequently 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 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 exam in these fields, included a declaration of religion that excluded Bahá’ís. (The applicant was given only three choices: Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian; the form explicitly stated that if none of the boxes were marked, the applicant would be considered Muslim.) The registration form for other institutions of higher education allowed Bahá’ís to take the exam without declaring a religious affiliation.
- Over 1,000 Bahá’í students took the exam in June 2007. About 800 of these students were later informed that their exam papers would not be graded, and the reason given in all cases was “incomplete file”. The numbers involved strongly suggest that this was yet another means to bar access to university for students known to be Bahá’ís.

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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.” Over 30 Bahá’í students have been expelled from Payame Noor since 2006.

<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)

- Only 237 of those who took the exam were informed that their marks were satisfactory and that they could apply for admittance. Fewer still – only 121 – were then allowed to select their field of study and admitted to universities nationwide. By January 2007, of these 121, at least 36 students had either not been allowed to register or had been identified as Bahá'ís and expelled.

Meanwhile, all of the official efforts to identify members of the community finally generated a simple way to seal off access to university for students 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 have written and appealed, using 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.

At this time, no information is available regarding the outcome of the 2009 national exam. Meanwhile, however, expulsions continue. In early March 2009, three Bahá'í students were expelled from Sahand University in Tabriz and another, a young woman from Tehran, was expelled from Semnan University, where she had been able to begin her studies.

We cannot but conclude that the authorities never intended to take the measures required to reverse the long-standing policies that continue to block access to higher education for those identified as Bahá'ís. Enrolling a tiny, token number can only be seen as a tactic to counter protest and to deceive the international community. Wasting the time and energy of hundreds of young Bahá'ís put them through serious emotional and financial stress, and it also enabled the authorities to identify them as adherents of the 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 an 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***

Bahá'í cemeteries, holy places, historical sites, administrative centres and other assets were seized shortly after the 1979 revolution. No community properties have been returned, and many have been destroyed. Seizure of cemeteries in some localities has had particularly painful consequences, as many Bahá'ís are now given access only to areas of wasteland designated by the government for this purpose.

The destruction of the cemetery in Yazd in 2005 has already been mentioned above. Other Bahá'í cemeteries were attacked and extensively damaged from 2006 to 2008, some partially or entirely demolished. Desecrations of Bahá'í cemeteries or graves were reported in 19 different localities. The Bahá'í cemetery in Darzikola (near Ghaemshahr) was attacked three times in four months in 2008. The graves were repeatedly desecrated, and on 19 January 2009 officials came to the cemetery again and razed it. Also in January 2009, government workers entered a cemetery in Tehran and destroyed a section known as the burial ground of “infidels”. Among the graves were those of a number of Bahá'ís, prominent members of the community killed by government agents during waves of persecution in 1980, 1981 and 1984.

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 (the most holy).<sup>13</sup> The destruction was carried out with full cooperation from the authorities, despite appeals and intervention by local Bahá'ís, who were even prevented from retrieving the sacred remains.

In June the same year, another sacred place was demolished: the house in Tehran that had belonged to the father of Bahá'u'lláh, a site associated with an important period in the history of the Faith. Following instructions issued by Ayatollah Kani, demolition was carried out in the presence of the Ayatollah's sons and Intelligence Ministry officials. The Iranian Bahá'ís found out that the mayor's office had received written instructions not to interfere with events pertaining to the building. They also talked to a few reporters, who discovered (through a computer search) that the demolition of this house was included in the list of topics about which they were not permitted to report.

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

The property rights of individual Bahá'ís are generally disregarded in Iran. Bahá'í homes are frequently searched and personal belongings are seized. Most of those arrested during the past four years have had their homes raided and numerous items confiscated, in particular personal 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 handed down 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***

The Iranian government has been carrying out a multifaceted scheme – well organized, widespread and systematic – to deny Bahá'ís the right to employment. In hundreds of cases over the past four to five years, officials have acted in many and various ways 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 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 from the Bahá'ís 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, an official 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 official efforts to identify all members of the Bahá’í community (which began in 2004-2005) have already been mentioned above. In 2006 it became clear 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:

- debarred Bahá’ís from government jobs
- warned private-sector employers against hiring Bahá’ís and/or harassed such employers to dismiss Bahá’í employees
- banned Bahá’ís who were working independently from continuing their activities
- 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
- summoned/interrogated Bahá’í shop owners, raided or even vandalized Bahá’í-owned stores, asked landlords to refuse lease renewals to Bahá’í tenant shopkeepers
- issued instructions to stores, government offices, electricity boards and other organizations to avoid purchasing from or to stop all business dealings with Bahá’ís
- incited the population to shun Bahá’í-owned businesses
- instructed banks to refuse to proceed with loan approvals for and/or to freeze assets in checking accounts belonging to Bahá’ís
- imposed excessively high bail demands, thus tying up deeds to property, business licenses and other assets for hundreds of Bahá’ís arbitrarily detained.

During 2007, such abuses occurred in 41 different localities. Shops and stock have been burnt in numerous instances while police watch. 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

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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.

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.

Banks have also 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 still being deprived of their rightfully earned pensions have 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 yearly 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 respect to ILO Convention 111 on Discrimination, under the organization’s procedure of 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**

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 often find Iranian embassy officials uncooperative. In some countries, Iranian embassies do not require applicants to state their religious

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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.

affiliation, and thus Bahá'ís find it easier to obtain visas or renew passports. 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.

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 right of Bahá'ís to inherit is generally denied.

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

The major upsurge in human rights violations against Bahá'ís over the past four years was preceded and is being accompanied by organized 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. Hundreds of articles, TV and radio programmes, children's books, school textbooks, 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 *Najés* [unclean]”. Similar falsehoods are widely distributed in anti-Bahá'í letters and pamphlets.

The language used in these attacks is clearly inspired by State-sanctioned media, which has engaged in a distortion of history, used fake historical documents and grossly maligned Bahá'í moral principles. Such articles have been appearing regularly for the past six years in *Kayhan*, one of the oldest and most influential daily newspapers in Iran, published by the Kayhan Institute and currently managed by Mr. Hossein Shariatmadari, who is also the representative of the Supreme Leader at the Institute. Extracts from the *Kayhan* articles have later appeared in other newspapers, on anti-Bahá'í websites and in recently published books.

We are particularly concerned about incitement to hatred in the media because of the violent attacks and the incidents (reported above) where Bahá'í children and adolescents were subjected to vilification and other abuse. 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, and all Bahá'í Internet sites are blocked within Iran, 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**

Outside Iran, the persecution against the Bahá'ís is one of the issues repeatedly denounced by the international community – the United Nations, intergovernmental bodies, civil society, and individuals of prominence – 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> The UN Secretary General did so, as well, in his October 2008 report on human rights in this country. Iran issued a standing invitation in 2002, but several Special Procedures – including the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, who has been requesting a visit for over seven years – have not been granted access to the country.

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 last presented reports to the Human Rights Committee and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1992-1993. The government is not cooperating with these treaty bodies and is thus not meeting its obligations under the International Covenants to which the State is Party.

We are gravely concerned about the gradual but steady increase, over the past four 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, intended to put members of the community under severe pressure – and also to disengage them from their friends and fellow citizens, by 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.

The most recent of these is A/HRC/10/8/Add.1, 16 February 2009, submitted to the HRC’s 10<sup>th</sup> session, entitled *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, Addendum, SUMMARY OF CASES TRANSMITTED TO GOVERNMENTS AND REPLIES RECEIVED*, available through the list at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/10session/reports.htm>  
see paragraphs. 86 – 112