

# The Babi and Baha'i community of Iran: a case of “suspended genocide”?

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## Persecution of the Babi and Baha'i community

The Baha'i community of Iran has its origins in the Babi movement, a religion which began in Iran in 1844. Its founder, Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi, who took the title the Bab (1819–1850), was executed in 1850 in the midst of a general persecution of the Babis that culminated in a general massacre in 1852. In about 1866, Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri (1817–1892), who took the title Baha'u'llah, openly claimed to be the religious leader prophesied by the Bab in his writings. Since more than 90% of the surviving Babis became followers of Baha'u'llah, Baha'is, at about this time, it is legitimate from the sociological and historical viewpoint to regard these two movements, the Babis and the Baha'is, as one movement and, hereinafter, for ease of reference, all phases will be referred to as persecutions of the Baha'is, although it should be born in mind that the first phase was in fact a persecution of the Babi community. In order to elucidate the background to this article, the following is a description of the four phases of the persecutions that the Babis and Baha'is in Iran have suffered.<sup>1</sup>

### *Phase 1*

The Babi movement was opposed from its very beginning. Less than one year after the Bab put forward his initial claim in May 1844, a trial in Baghdad of the Bab's emissary to Iraq unanimously condemned the Bab as a heretic and apostate and, by a majority, sentenced his emissary to death for spreading the heresy (Momen, 1982).<sup>2</sup> In 1848–1849, the Shah sent some 6,000 troops and batteries of canon against a band of about 500 Babis who had taken up defensive positions near the Caspian at the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsí. Eventually in May 1849, the starving Babis were induced to surrender on the promise of a safe conduct, and were then set upon and massacred.<sup>3</sup> Two further clashes occurred in the two provincial towns where Babis were an appreciable proportion of the population: Nayriz, in the south

of Iran, and Zanjan, in the north. Both of these episodes ended with a general massacre of the Babis.<sup>4</sup> In the course of the year 1850, the Prime Minister decided that the best way of putting an end to the Babi upheaval was to execute the founder of the movement who was being held in prison. The Bab was brought to Tabriz and executed there in July 1850.

Frustration and anger at the execution of their leader led a small group of Babis to make an attempt on the life of the Shah in 1852. The attempt failed and Nasir ad-Din Shah was infuriated. Although only a small group of Babis had been responsible for the attempt on his life, the Shah ordered a general massacre (*qatl-i 'ámm*) of the Babis wherever they were found (Mázandarání, n.d., p 71). No one can be certain how many Babis were killed in this outburst.

Conservative estimates put the total number of Babis killed during the whole period of 1848 to 1853 at 3,000, while other historians, including the Iranian court chronicler Sipíhr and the Baha'i leader 'Abdu'l-Baha (1844–1921), claim 20,000 or more. The main reason for the indecisiveness about the numbers killed relates to the events after the attempted assassination of Nasir ad-Din Shah. While many only give a list of 35 men officially executed in Tehran and a small number elsewhere, there are some accounts, such as the following from the Comte de Gobineau (quoted in Momen, 1981, pp 144–145), who was French Minister in Tehran shortly after these events, that seem to imply a much larger number of deaths:

One saw that day in the streets and bazaars of Teheran a spectacle that the population will never forget. One saw, walking between staffs of executioners, children and women, with the flesh gaping all over their bodies, with lighted wicks soaked in on stuck in the wounds. The victims were dragged by cords and driven with whips. The children and women walked singing a verse, which says, "In truth we come from God, and we return to Him." Their voices rose piercingly in the middle of the profound silence of the mob; for the population of Teheran is neither bad-hearted nor much devoted to Islam. When one of the tortured people fell, he was forced to rise with blows from whips and prods from bayonets. If the loss of blood which ensued from the wounds all over the body left him strength enough, he began to dance and shout with fervour, "We belong to God, and we return to Him." Some of the children expired en route. The executioners threw their bodies under the feet of their father and sister, who walked fiercely upon them, without looking.

When they arrived at the place of execution near the new gate, life was again offered to the victims if they would abjure their faith, and, though it seemed difficult, means were sought to intimidate them. The executioner hit upon the device of signing to a father that if he did not abjure he would cut the throat of his two sons upon his chest. These were two small boys, the eldest being fourteen, who, red with their own blood and with flesh scorched by the candles, listened unmoved. The father answered by lying down on the earth that he was ready, and the eldest of the boys, claiming his right of birth, begged to have his throat cut first. It is not impossible that the executioner refused him this last satisfaction. At last everything was ended, and the night fell upon a heap of mangled human remains. The heads were strung in bundles to the Posts of Justice, and all the dogs of the suburbs made their way to that side of the town.

*Phase 2*

After this, the Babi movement had effectively been silenced and driven underground. It was not until the late 1860s that the Babi movement resurfaced. By this time, it had been reinvigorated and transformed under the leadership Baha'u'llah. He claimed to be the figure of "He whom God will make manifest" who had been prophesied by the Bab and the inaugurator of a new religious dispensation. His followers thus began to call themselves Baha'is. Although Baha'u'llah forbade the Baha'is to take any action against the state or even to meddle in politics, the Iranian government and religious leaders continued their unrelenting hostility towards the movement. The hostility was, however, for much of the time dormant. Most of the religious leaders, having achieved their primary objective of preventing the movement from becoming a serious rival, turned their attention to other matters, as did the people and the government.

The persecutions against the Baha'is took on a new form. The majority of the Baha'is hid their allegiance and tried to avoid problems in this way. From time to time, however, an outburst of persecution would occur in a particular place. On one occasion one or two leading Baha'is might be executed; on another, Baha'i houses might be looted and Baha'is beaten up; at another time, the Baha'is of a locality might be driven from their homes and expelled. For example, in the Isfahan area where there were probably no more than 2,000 Baha'is, between 1874 and 1921 there were some 19 episodes of persecution resulting in about 15 deaths (Momen, 1991, p 33). The most serious episode during this phase was in Yazd in 1903 when about 100 Baha'is were killed.

Even when there was not any major episode of persecution occurring, however, there was an ongoing lower level of harassment. Muslim neighbours or local religious leaders would use threats of denunciation as a Baha'i to extort money or advantage for themselves; relatives would seize the inheritance of Baha'is on the pretext that non-Muslims could not inherit; while verbal and physical abuse were commonplace. The net effect was that the Baha'i community never felt secure and was always psychologically under intense pressure.

*Phase 3*

With the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty, the persecutions of the Baha'is took on a different format. In the preceding phase, the persecutions were initiated by local factors and the central government would sometimes support the local action but sometimes oppose it for fear of losing control. Now, with the strong centralizing impetus of the Pahlavi regime, it was the central government itself that gradually became the principle initiator of the persecutions. Consequently, where previously the persecutions had some element of mob action, they now acquired a more bureaucratic character and were often accompanied by government directives and edicts through the courts. This was partly because by this time, the Baha'i community itself had become much more open and visible. It was building Baha'i centres, schools and other communal facilities. Thus for

example, in 1934, the government suddenly used the fact that a Baha'i school had closed on a Baha'i holy day as the excuse to shut down permanently the large network of Baha'i schools (some 60 in all). Measures were put in place to prevent Baha'is from printing books, importing printed matter, or registering their marriages. Many Baha'is were turned out of government and military posts. In 1938, it even became a criminal offence to have a wedding other than under the procedures of one of the recognized religions. Since the Baha'i Faith had not been recognized in the 1906 Constitution, this meant that many young Baha'i men were imprisoned simply for getting married. One consequence of becoming much more visible during this period was the fact that the Baha'is were more easily identified and therefore could be subjected to harassment and persecution. Being stoned by other children on their way to Baha'i school, for example, became a part of growing up for many Baha'i children.

The most serious episode of persecution during the Pahlavi era took place in 1955 when a minor cleric, Falsafi, was given the freedom to broadcast on the government radio station inflammatory speeches rousing the mob to action against the Baha'is. There was a country-wide outburst of harassment of Baha'is with much looting and some deaths. This episode probably occurred because the Shah felt obligated to the religious establishment which helped him back to power after the coup against him by Mosaddeq in 1953.

During this phase, the Baha'i community became more organized in its response to persecution. At first, appeals would be made to the local authorities, and if this failed to the national government. On several occasions, Shoghi Effendi (who was head of the Baha'i Faith, 1921–1957) even organized the Baha'i communities in other parts of the world to write to the Shah and appeal to him to stop the persecutions. The most notable instance of this was during the 1955 persecutions when there was a campaign in the Western press to mobilize opinion against the persecutions.

#### *Phase 4*

The Falsafi episode of 1955 was a foretaste of what was to occur after the Islamic revolution of 1979. After this revolution, the bureaucratic harassment and government-directed denials of human rights increased sharply. This differed qualitatively from the situation before 1979 in that whereas previously the Baha'is merely fell victim to sporadic government actions, there was now a specific and planned programme for the elimination of the Baha'i community. The United Nations special representative on the human rights situation in Iran made a detailed assessment of the situation as a result of several trips to Iran. Among the measures that he reported taken by the government against the Baha'i community at the institutional level were the following:<sup>5</sup>

- official banning of all Baha'i institutions and activities;
- arrest and execution of the entire body of the national leadership of the religion;
- arrest and execution of many members of local leadership councils;

- confiscation of Baha'i properties and assets, including a children's savings company;
- confiscation, desecration and destruction of Baha'i holy places and cemeteries.

Among the persecutions and harassments that the United Nations special representative reported were suffered by individual Baha'is were the following:

- imprisonment and torture;
- expulsion of Baha'is from all government employment at the national and local level;
- encouragement of and pressure on other employers to dismiss their Baha'i employees;
- decrees that government pensions were not payable to any Baha'is;
- Baha'is ordered to pay back past salaries and pensions paid to them over their lifetime;
- forced closure of Baha'i-owned businesses;
- expulsion or refusal of admission of Baha'i children to schools and universities;
- lack of official marriage certificates for Baha'is leading to married Baha'i women being considered to be prostitutes and Baha'i babies being considered illegitimate;
- lack of places to bury Baha'i dead after confiscation of Baha'i cemeteries;
- exclusion from necessary social amenities such as obtaining ration cards or food supplies, farmers being excluded from farmer's cooperatives, etc.;
- confiscation of property and bank accounts;
- destruction of homes;
- exclusion from inheritance bequests;
- denial of passport applications;
- forced marriages and adoptions of children;
- extra-judicial abductions and murders;
- a declaration by the judiciary on several occasions that anyone who beat, robbed or killed a Baha'i could not be prosecuted for it, thus effectively giving a green light for anyone to do these things with impunity.

In addition to the above, over the last two decades such pressure has been exerted on Baha'is living in the villages that, even in villages where Baha'is formed the majority of the population, they have been compelled to leave. The result is a "religious cleansing" parallel to the "ethnic cleansing" that occurred in the Balkans, with Baha'is now almost entirely cleared from large areas of rural Iran. This aspect of the persecutions, because it has happened in more isolated areas, has yet to be fully documented and has escaped the notice of most reports.

Over the last 20 years, when the Iranian government was confronted with these facts, it at first denied that any persecution was going on. When faced with incontrovertible evidence, it maintained that these persecutions were not because of the religion of the defendants, but because of crimes they had committed. When presented with documentary evidence from Iranian courts showing that Baha'is

had been executed, imprisoned and otherwise harassed specifically because of their religion (including, often, documented statements that if they recanted their religion, they would escape punishment), the Iranian government tried to assert that the Baha'is had brought this upon themselves by their assistance to the Shah in the past or because they were "foreign spies."

By the start of the 1990s, however, international pressure had grown so intense and Iran's own position had weakened so much economically and politically that the Iranian government was forced to reconsider its position. However, rather than recognizing the Baha'i community, it sought to make more of an effort to conceal the situation of the Baha'i community. Instructions were given that court and tribunal documents were to avoid mentioning that Baha'is were being prosecuted because they were Baha'is, but to invent other pretexts upon which to prosecute them. They were to avoid giving any document at all to Baha'is in case these were later used at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. A few minor concessions were also made. Thus for example, it became easier for many Baha'is to obtain passports. The fundamental aim remained the same, however: the elimination of the Baha'i community from Iran. This underlying motive is nowhere better demonstrated than the following calculated and chilling memorandum issued from the very highest level of the Iranian leadership. The following is the translation, taken from the report of the Special Representative of the UN Commission on Human Rights of the part of this document that lists the measures to be taken against the Baha'is:

- a. With regard to the general condition of Baha'is, the following guidelines are hereby adopted:
  - i. They shall not be expelled from the country without reason;
  - ii. They will not be detained, imprisoned, or punished without reason;
  - iii. The Government's treatment of them shall be such that their progress and development shall be blocked.
- b. With regard to their educational and cultural situation, the following directions are hereby adopted:
  - i. They may be enrolled in schools provided that they do not identify themselves as Baha'is, but they shall if possible be assigned to schools with a strong religious ideology;
  - ii. When a student is known to be a Baha'i, he shall be expelled from university, either during the admission process or in the course of the academic year;
  - iii. Their political activities, "including espionage," shall be countered by means of the relevant official policies and laws, and their religious activities and teaching shall be confronted by means of other religious activities and teaching, cultural responses and propaganda;
  - iv. The propaganda institutions, (such as the Islamic Propaganda Organization) shall establish special sections to counter the religious activities and teachings of the Baha'is;

- v. A plan shall be formulated to combat and destroy the cultural roots which this group has outside the country.
- c. As regards their legal and social position, the following guidelines are hereby adopted:
  - i. They shall be permitted to lead a modest life similar that of the population in general;
  - ii. To the extent that this does not constitute encouragement for them to persist in their status as Baha'is, they shall be allowed the normal means to live like all other Iranian citizens, such rations books, passports, death certificates and work permits;
  - iii. Employment shall be refused to persons identifying themselves as Baha'is;
  - iv. They shall also be denied positions of influence, for example in the education sector.<sup>6</sup>

The full document, which is dated 1991, but only came to light in 1993, makes it clear that these guidelines for dealing with the Baha'is had been drawn up at a joint meeting of Hashemi-Rafsanjani, then President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council. They were then forwarded to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and he has appended his signed approval at the bottom of the document. The document makes it clear that the aim is to present a favourable image to the world by appearing to restore to them certain rights, but to continue to try to strangle the Baha'i community culturally and economically, by refusing them employment and access to higher education (Baha'i International Community, 1993, pp 36–41). Moreover, although there was relaxation of some measures, there was tightening in other areas—measures were taken, for example, to suppress the underground university that the Baha'is had set up because they were denied access to the country's universities.

The Baha'i response to the developing situation in Iran was similar to the approach taken in 1955, but has been much more systematic and vigorous. At first, appeals were addressed to the local and national government. It soon became clear that this was having no effect and in September 1980, the Baha'is first brought the situation to the attention of the United Nations Sub-Commission on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. Since that time, the Baha'i International Community, the agency through which the Baha'i community acts within the United Nations framework, has pursued an active campaign on behalf of the Baha'is of Iran. Over the years, the matter has been taken forward to the Commission on Human Rights, to the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly, and finally to the UN General Assembly itself, which passed a resolution in 1985 critical of Iran (details in Ghanea, 2002).

### **Descriptions of genocide**

A number of descriptions of the genocides that have occurred in the past have been published. It is possible to compare these case studies with the Baha'i situation in

Iran. Thus the Baha'i persecutions can be compared to the Albigensian Crusades carried out against the Cathars by the Pope, the King of France and the Inquisition (1208–1226). Joseph Strayer (1971, pp 8–10) states that the Inquisition used four “techniques that led to the disintegration of the heretical sects. All of these techniques were used by European states of the later Middle Ages. Modern totalitarian governments have made few innovations; they have simply been more efficient.” These four techniques were:

1. “Continuing pressure.” The Baha'i community has been under continuing pressure in Iran since its inception in 1844 as the Babi community. These pressures have varied at times with two peak periods in 1848–1853 and 1979–present.
2. “The use of torture.” Baha'is were routinely subjected to torture whenever arrested in the Qajar period 1844–1923. Torture re-emerged as a weapon against the Baha'is after the Islamic revolution of 1979. Most of the thousands of Baha'is who have been imprisoned since the Islamic Revolution have reported some degree of torture.
3. “The imposition of social and economic disabilities.” Social and economic disabilities have been imposed upon the Babi and Baha'i community since about 1848. These range from minor inconveniences in daily life to major disabilities.
4. “A nicely graded set of penalties that encouraged the weak to betray the strong in return for immunity or token punishments.” Baha'is who recant their belief are offered release from imprisonment and torture, a return of confiscated goods and property, and usually financial rewards and offers of good jobs. They were also offered that they would be spared the public confessions on television to which many of the regime's political prisoners were subjected, but only had to place a small advertisement announcing their recantation in a newspaper (Abrahamian, 1999, p 143).

Features of the Albigensian Crusades mentioned by other writers which are also to be found in the case of the Baha'is of Iran include the following factors noted by Chalk and Jonassohn (1990, p 115):

1. “Making the denunciation of fellow citizens an obligation that takes precedence over ties of family and kinship.” Most of the Baha'is held in prison report relentless questioning, often under torture, by the Iranian authorities about which of their family and friends were also Baha'is.
2. “Defining retraction of extorted confessions as a relapse and therefore a proof of guilt.” Any Baha'i who recants and converts to Islam is prevented from withdrawing that recantation by the knowledge that this would constitute apostasy which would be punishable by death.

Robert Melson (cited in Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990, pp 18–19) has compared the Jewish and Armenian genocides and found the following factors in common. All of these factors can also be considered to be operating in the case of the Baha'is,

especially in the period since 1979 (all quotations in the following list are from Melson):

1. The victim group is “a communal minority,” “tolerated” but not “considered as equal.” There is a history of persecution of and contempt for the group. The Baha’is are a communal minority which has been barely tolerated, been treated with contempt and frequently persecuted from its birth to the present.
2. The victim group adapts more successfully to the modern world. It “makes progress in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres.” This creates tension with the majority who finds this progress “illegitimate and threatening to the old order which was based on inequality.” The Baha’is, because of their emphasis on education, the equality of men and women and their openness to the modern world, were more successful in trade and the professions especially from about the 1920s onwards. Many Iranians were jealous and resentful of this and often attributed it to conspiracies and foreign influence.
3. The “victimised group comes to be identified, either geographically or ideologically, with the enemies of the larger society and state.” This identification may be real or imaginary but it functions to establish “a link between an external and an internal threat.” As early as the 1930s, accusations were rife that the Baha’is were in league with the British and/or the Russians, the two main powers that were active in Iran. In the 1940s, for example, the forged memoirs of a former Russian ambassador were published purporting to show that he had incited the Bab to put forward his claims and had organized the movement. Because Baha’u’llah had been exiled in the nineteenth century by the Ottoman authorities to the city of Akka in what was then Syria, this city and the neighbouring city of Haifa became the world headquarters of the Baha’i Faith. Since Haifa and Akka are now in the state of Israel, this has led to a new range of accusations that the Baha’is are agents for Zionism and American imperialism, accusations that have gained markedly in ferocity and frequency since the Islamic regime came to power in 1979.
4. The larger society experiences “a series of significant military and political disasters that undermines their security and worldview.” We have seen above how, throughout the twentieth century, local and, at times, national government, occasionally used a persecution of the Baha’is as a way of diverting attention away from problems. The Islamic republic has continued this trend. Having failed to produce the benefits it promised to those who supported it in the early years of the Revolution, the regime has increasingly had to find scapegoats to explain its failures. Among these scapegoats has been the Baha’i community.

The actions of the Iranian government also fit the description given by Helen Fein (1984, p 7) of governments trying to respond to accusations of genocide. She has stated that the most common way for governments who are initiating a genocide against a group to respond, when called upon to account for their actions, is to deny that anything is happening. This was also the early response

of the Iranian government which denied that there was any persecutions of the Baha'is in the years immediately after the Iranian revolution of 1979. The other main way of accounting for genocide is for the government to "declare state actions to be defensive responses to attacks by the victims." This was also a ploy, used at a later stage, by the Iranian government, who accused the Baha'is of being spies for America and Israel and plotting against Iran.

### **Pathways to genocide**

Helen Fein has given a description of the pathway towards genocide along which the Nazis progressed in the years leading up to the inception of the Holocaust and the Turks in the years leading up to the Armenian massacres. Her description tries to identify the preconditions or causes of these events. The experiences of the Baha'i community in Iran since 1979 have many features which remind one of the pathway drawn by Helen Fein. The following are the main features that Helen Fein (1979, pp 9–10) identifies:

1. "The victims have previously been defined outside the universe of [ethical] obligation of the dominant group." We have seen that the Baha'is had suffered from a century of persecution. The Shi'i Islamic ideology of the new regime in Iran after 1979 further intensified this tendency to place the Baha'is outside of the normal duty of a state and government to look after its citizens. Since they denied the possibility of a further legitimate religion arising after Islam, the Islamic clerics had decreed the Baha'i Faith to be a heresy, the adherents of which were punishable by death. On several occasions, the courts in Iran gave judgements on diverse cases such as pension rights and road traffic accidents that effectively stated that the Baha'is had no rights at all in Iran—they could be deprived of what they had worked for (such as wages and pensions), nor was injuring them or killing them to be considered an offence. (Helen Fein considers this a necessary but not sufficient condition for step 3 below.)
2. "The rank of the state has been reduced in war and/or internal strife." The 1979 Revolution in Iran was itself, of course, a major episode of internal strife. This was followed by a period in which several groups such as the Mujahidin struggled against the Islamic regime trying to wrest control of the revolution away from Khomeini and the Islamic hierarchy. Then shortly after the Revolution came the Iran–Iraq war that lasted from 1980 to 1988—a prolonged, debilitating and, towards the end, pointless war, draining away the enthusiasm that people had had for the Revolution. (Helen Fein considers this a predisposing condition for step 3 to occur.)
3. An elite rises to power that adapts a new political formula "to justify the nation's domination." Helen Fein (1979, p 8; 1984, p 18) talks about the ideology of the dominant group creating a hegemonic myth in which the qualities of the dominant group are idealized and the victim group placed outside the

sanctioned universe of obligation. This type of mythology was very dominant in the rhetoric of Shi'i Islam which makes the Shi'i Muslims into a mythic nation against which the whole world is arrayed. This type of mythology was very much the subject of the speeches of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Baha'is fitted into this myth as "the enemy within." Since the Baha'is were the enemies of the true Faith, they were necessarily also the enemies of God and the supporters of Satan. The Attorney-General of the Republic, Sayyid Musavi-Tabrizi, stated, for example, "The Quran recognises only the People of the Book [in Iran this is interpreted as Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians] as religious communities. Others are pagans. Pagans must be eliminated."<sup>7</sup> Stigmatized as pagans, heretics and apostates, the Baha'is are subject to the death penalty according to religious law. (Helen Fein considers this a necessary but not sufficient condition for premeditated genocide to occur.)

4. "The calculus of the costs of exterminating the victim changes as the perpetrators instigate or join a . . . war against those who have earlier protected and/or who might conceivably protest persecution of the victim." As Helen Fein states, war reduces "the deterrents against genocide" in that it obscures "the visibility of such actions" and provides the perpetrators with justification of the programme through accusing the victims of aiding the enemy. The Iranian people were also encouraged by Khomeini's rhetoric to see themselves in an ongoing war with the "Great Satan" (USA) and its allies (Israel and Britain). The persecution of the Baha'is in Iran worsened markedly during the years of the Iran-Iraq war and, during this period, almost every step taken against the Baha'i community was justified by accusations that the victims were spies or a fifth column acting for the Zionism or the United States.

Helen Fein (1979, pp 9–10) considers Steps 3 and 4 together "constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions or causes of premeditated genocide." In later works, Helen Fein herself has assessed the Baha'i situation as belonging within this framework, in that she categorizes the Baha'i situation in Iran as ideological genocide (see below).

Similarly, Israel Charny (1999, p 260), in describing the stages leading to genocide, states that the last and most advanced stage is when a society's leadership endorses and ratifies the process. The leaders in the government "authorize and praise the killing of the target victim-people, the courts dismiss or simply do not bring charges against perpetrators, the churches bless in the name of their gods, and so on." Charny is here giving a generic description and so he does not give any specific examples, but it is clear that this description of the final stage leading up to genocide applies in the Baha'i case. Where the highest levels of the Iranian state have praised attacks on Baha'is; where the courts have declared that the life and property of a Baha'i could be taken with impunity; and where the religious leadership supports and praises attacks on Baha'is and even makes this a religious duty and declares the killing of Baha'is an act that would be rewarded in heaven.

### Typologies of genocide

There are various typologies of genocide. Some classify genocide by the outcome. For example, Hervé Savon's classification (cited in Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990, p 13) describes outcomes of substitution, devastation and elimination. Such typologies are not, however, favoured by many, since they do not illuminate the events leading up to genocide and are thus not of much help in understanding the process leading up to such events and formulating strategies to prevent them. Other typologies include classification by the type of society in which genocide occurs (liberal or repressive), by the type of victim group (national, ethnic, racial, religious, economic, political and social groups and whether these are within or outside the society), or by types of accusation (those that are independently verifiable and those that are merely pseudo-accusations) (Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990, pp 29–31).

Most scholars in this field are agreed, however, that the most useful typologies are those classified by the motives of the perpetrator. Helen Fein has found a certain convergence between five of the typologies that have been suggested: those from Dadrian (D) (1975), Kuper (K) (1981), Fein (F) (1984, pp 8–22), Smith (S) (1987), and Chalk and Jonassohn (C) (1990, p 29). These five typologies have suggested four main groups:

1. Developmental (F) or utilitarian (D and S) genocide against indigenous peoples (K), to acquire economic wealth (C).
2. Despotic (F), latent (D) or institutional (S) genocide corresponds to genocidal massacres (such as the bombing of Hiroshima or Dresden) (K) designed to spread terror among real or potential enemies (C).
3. Retributive (F, D and S) genocide (designed to punish a minority that challenges a dominant group) may occur following decolonization of a two-tier system of domination (K) or to eliminate a real or potential threat (C).
4. Ideological (F, S) or optimal (D) genocide against a hostage or scapegoat group (K) to implement a belief or ideology (C).

While the Babi persecutions in 1848–1853 described above could fit into Type 3, insofar as the Babis were seen as a threat to the established order, especially after the attempted assassination of the Shah in 1853, the main classification into which the Babi and Baha'i persecutions fit, especially since 1979, is Type 4 of this classification. Helen Fein (1993, p 86) herself has placed the Baha'is alongside only two other episodes since 1945 that fit into Type 4, ideological genocide. This is the most serious category and includes both the Jewish and Armenian Holocausts from before 1945.

### Definitions of genocide

One problem in assessing the question of whether indeed the Baha'is of Iran can be considered to have been subjected to genocide is the fact that there is no generally

agreed definition of the term genocide (see discussion of the various definitions in Fein, 1992, pp 2–5; Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990, pp 23–27).

The first to coin the term “genocide” was Raphael Lemkin in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, published in 1944 (pp 79–95). By this term he intended to “signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves” (p 79). He states that the “objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups” (p 79). He describes two phases to the process of genocide: “the destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group” and “the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor” (p 79). Thus, for Lemkin, genocide does not necessarily involve the physical annihilation of a group, but may rather involve non-lethal actions against its cultural, religious or linguistic existence. He emphasizes that with genocide, the actions involved are directed against individuals “not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group” (p 79). Although he refers throughout to “national groups,” he makes it clear by including Jews in his discussion of such groups that he is including other definable groups, such as religious groups, although he does not explicitly define these. Lemkin (1944, pp 82–90) describes the “fields” of genocide, as practised by the Nazi forces in Europe, as being: political, social, cultural, economic, biological, physical, religious, and moral.

Clearly the persecutions of the Baha’is comply in large measure to Lemkin’s definition and description here. The “destruction of the essential foundations” of life would apply; the objective of the “disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence” would also all apply in the case of the Baha’is (except of course the language and national feelings, although the later could be replaced by “communal feelings”); “the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups” all apply.

The most influential definition of genocide is that to be found in the United Nations Genocide Convention of December 9, 1948. This defined genocide as:

Any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- a. Killing members of the group;
- b. Causing serious bodily harm to members of the group;
- c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990, pp 44–49)

This definition can also be held to apply to the Baha’i situation in that actions (a), (b), (c), and (e) have occurred since 1979 with the express intent of destroying this

religious group. Paul Allen (1987, pp 345–346) has analysed the Baha'i persecutions in Iran in relation to the Genocide Convention and concludes that Iran has violated this convention. Yet many scholars have criticized this definition, particularly because it excludes certain groups such as political ones. However, as Helen Fein (1992, p 3) has pointed out, this is the legal definition for the purposes of international criminal law.

Many scholars have found it more useful to concentrate their definition on the intent of the perpetrator rather than on the outcome. Dadrian (cited in Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990, p 14) for example defines genocide thus:

Genocide is the successful attempt by a dominant group, vested with formal authority and/or with preponderant access to the overall resources of power, to reduce by coercion or lethal violence the number of a minority group whose ultimate extermination is held desirable and useful and whose respective vulnerability is a major factor contributing to the decision for genocide.

Chalk and Johannsohn (1990, p 23) also define genocide in relation to the intent of the perpetrator:

Genocide is a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator.

Here again, the case of the Babis in 1848–1853 and the Baha'is since 1979 can be said to comply fully with these two definitions.

Helen Fein (1979, p 7) makes a distinction between collective violence (which she defines as “deliberate injury or extraordinary punishments inflicted against a people just because they are members of a collectivity”) and genocide. The difference lies in that genocide is “centrally planned and purposeful, and in that its intent is total.” Thus the aim of collective violence is “to put (or keep) a subjugated group in its place” while the aim of genocide is total elimination. Again, there is little doubt that both the Babis in 1848–1853 and the Baha'is since 1979 fully comply with this definition of genocide.

Another influential definition of genocide comes from Yehuda Bauer (quoted in Chalk and Jonassohn, 1990, p 20):

The planned destruction, since the mid-nineteenth century, of a racial, national, or ethnic group as such, by the following means:

- a. selective mass murder of elites of parts of the population;
- b. elimination of national (racial, ethnic) culture and religious life with the intent of “denationalization”;
- c. enslavement, with the same intent;
- d. destruction of national (racial, ethnic) economies, with the same intent;
- e. biological decimation through the kidnapping of children or prevention of normal family life with the same intent.

Of course, the Baha'is are a religious rather than a racial, national, or ethnic group, but the events that occurred to the Babis in 1848–1853 fit (a) and (b), while what has happened to the Baha'is after 1979 fits (a), (b), (d), and (e).

In all, then, the case of the Babis and Baha'is in Iran fits the definition of genocide according to several different authorities.

### **The opinions of scholars of genocide studies**

In looking at the question of whether the Baha'i situation in Iran should be classed a case of genocide, we should examine the opinions of some of the scholars in this field. Unfortunately, none of them has published a detailed analysis of this question, but several of them have commented on this matter in passing. Even then, all of their comments relate to Phase 4 of the Baha'i persecutions and few if any have looked at the earlier phases.

In cataloguing known and suspected cases of genocide this century, Walter Ezell (1988, p 2886) includes the Baha'is among 31 cases that he lists. Barbara Harff and Ted Robert Gurr (1988, p 365) list the situation with Mujahedeen, Kurds and Baha'is in Iran as one of 44 cases of genocide and politicide occurring since World War II. The categorization of the Baha'is in this latter article has, however, been distorted by their being lumped together with the Kurds and Mujahedeen, who were groups in active and armed opposition to the government.<sup>8</sup> Helen Fein (1993, p 87) lists the Baha'is among 18 episodes of genocide that she identifies between 1945 and 1990.

Leo Kuper (1985, pp 152–153) stated that, in his view:

the persecutions [of the Baha'is] recall the early stages in the genocide against the Jews. There are the charges of international conspiracy, the incitement of mobs with license for atrocity, the dismissals from government employment, exclusion from schools, desecration and destruction of holy places, expropriation of property, and judicial murder directed against leaders of the Baha'i faith. But in contrast to the Jewish victims of German genocide, the evil decree may be averted by a recantation of faith and conversion to Islam. Most Baha'is elect martyrdom.

He goes on to say that:

All the signs indicate a policy directed toward the systematic suppression of the Baha'i religion in Iran, and a serious threat of genocide against its adherents . . . I have described the Baha'is in Iran as a hostage group. But they are being subjected to a specifically religious persecution designed to eliminate the Baha'i religion in Iran and comparable therefore to the suppression of the Albigensian and Huguenot heresies in thirteenth and sixteenth-century France.

Later in 1990, Kuper (quoted in Charny, 1999, Vol 2, p 382) stated: "I think that the persecution of the Baha'is is correctly described as a threatened genocide, averted only by the skilled representations of the Baha'i international community and resolute action in the United Nations and the European Parliamentary Assembly" (on the Baha'i campaign, see Kuper, 1985, pp 163–164; Kuper, 1992, pp 139–140). Helen Fein has, as we have seen above, classified the Baha'i situation in Iran as a case of ideological genocide, which places it alongside the Jewish Holocaust in Germany and the Armenian massacres during the first World War.

From a legal viewpoint, Paul Allen, writing in the *Cornell International Law Journal* (1987, p 339), states his view that “The Baha’is’ persecutions are tantamount to systematic genocide.” He also cites the International Commission of Jurists as stating as early as 1981 that the statements of the UN Human Rights Commission come “close” to such an allegation.<sup>9</sup>

Several non-governmental organizations, such as Genocide Watch and the Campaign to End Genocide, also include the situation of the Baha’is in Iran on their lists of situations where genocide is in the process of occurring.<sup>10</sup>

### **Some objections to the categorization of genocide**

There are a number of points that it is possible to make in objection to the categorization of the situation of the Baha’is in Iran as genocide. The first relates to Phase 1 and can be stated thus: given that the Babis defended themselves with arms in the three episodes of Shaykh Tabarsí, Zanzan and Nayriz and made an attempt on the life of the Shah before the 1852 persecutions, can this not be seen as rebellion and would this not mitigate the actions of the Shah and his army in suppressing them? The answer to this question depends on our assessment of the aims of the Babis themselves: were they aiming to overthrow the government or merely defending themselves? Zabihi-Moghaddam (2002) has undertaken a detailed analysis of the evidence and concludes that it points mainly to the second alternative. During the Shaykh Tabarsi episode, for example, the Babis defeated the royal troops on several occasions. Had they been aiming at overthrowing the government, they would have taken the opportunity to march on the capital before the Shah could mobilize new forces. Instead they remained within their defensive positions. The Bab himself never proclaimed a holy war (*jihád*) against the state, even after the persecutions started. This state of affairs is similar to the situation in other recognized cases of genocide. Some of the Jewish ghettos in Europe did put up resistance to the forces of Nazism and Fascism before being overwhelmed; the Cathars did defend themselves in prolonged sieges before being overcome by the forces of the Catholic King of France.

The second question relates to Phase 4 and this is along the following lines: the above description of the persecutions of the Baha’is after the Iranian revolution of 1979 would certainly constitute a severe infraction of the human rights of Baha’is under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but would it be grounds for an accusation of genocide given that the total number of executions of Baha’is has been a little over 200? Here the response must be in terms of the intention of the perpetrators. Certainly the list of persecutions reads like a list of human rights violations, but the 1991 document, coming as it does from the very top of the national leadership of the country, indicates clearly that this is part of a centrally-organized campaign aiming at the strangulation and eventual elimination of the Baha’i community of Iran. It demonstrates that genocide was contemplated and planned and that the 1991 document is merely a tactical re-thinking of this goal in the face of the international outcry. Thus the World Federalist Organization’s Campaign to End Genocide recognizes that there is a question over

whether “the treatment of Iranian Baha’i fits into the limited United Nations definition of genocide” and responds: “Clearly, the attack on the group is based on religious distinctions manipulated by the political elite. Although the number of deaths has not reached the horrific levels of other cases of genocide, Iran seeks to eliminate them as a group through murder and social deprivation, thus meeting the UN Convention’s definition of genocide.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the comparative analysis with Helen Fein’s description of the pathway towards genocide shows clearly that all of the necessary and sufficient causes have been fulfilled for genocide to occur.

The third possible objection would be that the Baha’is themselves, in raising their case at the United Nations, have generally avoided using the framework of the Genocide Convention and have instead concentrated on the situation in Iran as a case of human rights abuse. If the Baha’is themselves are not claiming that this is a case of genocide, why should anyone else? In fact, the Baha’i International Community does appear to have invoked the Genocide Convention up to about 1985 (Ghanea, 2002, pp 116–118, 301, 303). After this, the actions of the Baha’i International Community may well have been determined by practical rather than theoretical considerations. Leo Kuper (1985, p 105) has stated that:

B.G. Ramacharan, a senior U.N. Human Rights official, drew my attention to the psychological reluctance within the United Nations to use the term *genocide*, even when dealing with it. He explained that there were substantive reasons for this reluctance. Charges of genocide immediately close off the possibility of discourse. If the objective is to arrive at a solution in cooperation with the government concerned, this is more readily achieved by handling the complaint under the procedures for dealing with gross violations of human rights.

Elsewhere, Kuper (1994, p 36) specifically states that the Baha’is “were advised to avoid the charge of genocide, a strategy they successfully followed.” Thus, the fact that the Baha’is have refrained in large part from invoking the Genocide Convention may well be a tactical consideration and should not affect an objective view of this question.

### **Some concluding remarks**

To summarize the evidence presented here, we can say that we have examined the Babi and Baha’i persecutions in Iran along a number of lines. We have examined the descriptions of a number of the most important instances of genocide, the Crusade against the Cathars and the Jewish and Armenian Holocausts of this century, and have found that the Baha’i case compares with these other cases in many of its features. We have looked at the progressive stages towards genocide identified by two scholars and found that the Baha’i case closely follows these up to the final stages. We have looked at typologies of genocide and found that the Baha’i case fits best into the category of ideological or optimal genocide against a hostage or scapegoat group to implement a belief or ideology. This category is in many ways the most serious one in that the major genocides of this century (the Jewish and Armenian Holocausts) fall into the same category.

We have examined some six definitions of genocide and found that the Babi and Baha'i persecutions fit these definitions, especially in Phases 1 and 4 of the persecutions. And finally we have examined what a number of scholars in the field of genocide studies have said about the Baha'i situation in Iran in Phase 4.

It would appear that there is good grounds for classifying the Babi and Baha'i persecutions in Iran as a case of genocide, especially in Phase 1 and 4. What appears to have happened in Phase 4 is that the Iranian government was intentionally and actively proceeding along the pathway towards a genocide but was stopped in its tracks by the vigorous international campaign waged by the international Baha'i community. This resulted in resolutions both in the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and in the United Nations General Assembly condemning Iran. Perhaps more immediately impacting on Iran was the international condemnation directed at it by all of its major trading partners. As Iran's economic and political position declined, owing to years of warfare and economic mismanagement, the ability of Iran to withstand such a concerted attack was reduced. The national government was forced, as the 1991 document conclusively shows, to re-think its tactics and re-formulate its goal with respect to the Baha'i community. The document clearly demonstrates that the ultimate goal of the Iranian government remains the same—the elimination of the Baha'i community—but it has been forced for the present to take steps to change its tactics so as to reduce the visibility of this goal.

I would therefore tend to agree with Kuper when, in 1985, he called the situation in Iran one of a "threatened genocide" (1985, p 163; see also Kuper, 1990, quoted in Charny, 1999, Vol 2, p 382). It could also then have been called an "incipient genocide." However, Kuper in 1990 spoke of the genocide of the Baha'is as having been "averted" (Kuper 1990, quoted in Charny, 1999, Vol 2, p 382) and Fein, in a book published in 1992 (p 12), called the Baha'i situation in Iran an "aborted genocide." Indeed some have considered that, with the election of Mr Khatami as President in 1997 bringing with him a reform agenda, the danger is now past; that although the Baha'is in Iran still face many human rights abuses, it could be considered that they are no longer in imminent danger of genocide. However, I would like to suggest that it is premature to label this situation an "aborted genocide" and think that the danger is over. The 1991 document shows clearly that individuals who are still at the very top of the Iranian governmental system have as their aim the elimination of the Baha'is and have only been constrained from that path by international pressure. The two signatories of the 1991 document are still arguably the two most powerful men in Iran. Khatami's position is precarious. He does not have the powers that one would normally associate with the president of a country. The clerical classes with their supervisory role and their ability to veto legislation and candidates for elections still have an iron grip on the country. The supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei, who signed his approval of the 1991 document, controls the armed forces, the revolutionary guards, the judiciary and the communications media as well as having the last word on any legislation or executive action of the

government, while Rafsanjani, the other signatory, is widely acknowledged as being the most powerful and influential figure behind the scenes.

I would, therefore, suggest that it is more appropriate to term the current situation a “suspended genocide” or perhaps an “arrested genocide.” This I think is a more appropriate term not only because it is more accurate, but also because it prevents any relaxation of vigilance over a situation that could deteriorate to a full genocide at any time. This is borne out by the fact that the persecutions worsened again during the period when reporting on Iran was dropped from the agenda of the UN Commission on Human Rights. Evidence for a continuing programme of elimination of the Baha’i cultural presence in Iran comes from the destruction in 2004 of two major Baha’i holy places. Evidence for the continuing attempts to demoralize the Baha’i community and deny Baha’is education comes from the fiasco over university places. After two decades of denying young Baha’is the opportunity to enter university, in late 2003 the application forms for the university entrance examinations were printed with no section where the applicant’s religion had to be stated. So many hundreds of young Baha’is took the entrance examinations, most of them opting to take the Islam option in the compulsory religious paper of the examination. Many were successful but when they were issued their registration cards in the summer of 2004, it was discovered that because they had sat the Islam paper, they were identified on these as Muslims—thus in order to attend university they would have to deny their own religion. Furthermore, if they should now press to be regarded as Baha’is they might be accused of having apostasized from Islam, a crime punishable by death under the Islamic law of Iran.<sup>12</sup>

One assumes that one of the main reasons for studying the phenomenon of genocide is to discern how it can be prevented or stopped in its early stages. The episode described in this article is one of the few occasions in which a rapid progression towards genocide which had gone through all of the stages depicted by scholars up to the start of the killing was successfully halted. As such it is worthy of closer scrutiny for the lessons to be learned from it.

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## Notes and References

- 1 No adequate description of the persecution of the Babi and Baha'i religions in Iran has ever been given. The events of the early Babi period are covered in works such as Amanat (1989). Some documents relating to later persecutions can be found in Momen (1981). See also Ghanea (2002) and Akhavan (1993). Two relevant papers in Persian are: Tavakkoli-Tarqi (2001) and Afshari (2001). Most publications have dealt with the Baha'i persecutions in Iran as a matter of human rights violations rather than in relation to potential genocide.
- 2 In fact, a verdict was requested from some 38 Sunni and 10 Shi'i clerics convened in Baghdad for the trial. The Sunni majority in the court condemned the Bab and his emissary to death outright, but the Shi'is,

- probably worried about precedent that this might set for the Ottoman government, while condemning the Bab's teaching as heresy, were more cautious with regard to the punishment they advocated.
- 3 There are a number of primary Babi and Baha'i accounts of this episode in Persian. Zabih-Moghaddam (2002) discusses these sources. The government accounts can be found in the court histories: Muhammad-Taqi Sipihri, *Násikh at-Tawárikh*, and Ridá-Qulí Khán Hidáyat, *Rawdat as-Safá-yi Násirí*; see summaries of these two sources in Browne (1891, pp 173–192). See also Nabil (1962, pp 324–429).
  - 4 The primary sources for the Zanjan episode are discussed in Walbridge (1996). Government accounts are in the sources mentioned in note 3. See also Nabil (1962, pp 527–581). The primary sources for the Nayriz upheaval are utilized by Nabil (1962, pp 465–499). Government accounts can be found in the sources indicated in note 3 and also in Fasá'í (1972, pp 290–294).
  - 5 The following two lists are based on Ghanea (2002, pp 99–154, 280–393). These are drawn from statements made by representatives of the Baha'i community in Iran and by the Baha'i International Community to the Special Representative of the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights and accepted by him in his report. Similar information can be found in Baha'i International Community (1993).
  - 6 Document Doc.E/CN.4/1993/Add.1, Commission on Human Rights, 49th Session, February 5, 1993, Agenda item 12, quoted in Ghanea (2002, pp 345–346).
  - 7 "Iran plans a final solution," *Sunday Times*, London, September 20, 1981, quoted in Ghanea-Hercock (1999, p 105).
  - 8 The situation in Iran is classified as Revolutionary/Repressive—that the action is being take against class or political enemies in the service of the revolutionary ideology or against political parties, factions and movements in order to repress opposition activity. This may apply to some degree to the Baha'is, although they are not a class or political enemy, but Harff and Gurr's category of xenophobic genocide would appear to be a better category for the Baha'is if they are considered separately from the Mujahedeen and Kurds.
  - 9 Allen (1987, p 346), citing note in *International Commission of Jurists Review*, Vol 4, 1981, p 5.
  - 10 <http://www.genocidewatch.org/genocidetable2003.htm> (accessed April 20, 2004); <http://www.endgenocide.org/genocide/bahai.html> (accessed April 20, 2004).
  - 11 <http://www.endgenocide.org/genocide/bahai.html> (accessed April 20, 2004).
  - 12 Information received in September 2004 from informants in Iran.