

Baha'is in Post-revolution Iran: Perspectives of the *Ulema*

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Abstract

Since the inception of the Baha'ism as an independent faith in Persia, its adherents came under attack from the religious clergy which perceived the growing popularity of this new faith as a threat to their monopolistic position in the society. Education and economy were the two dominant fields where the Baha'is prospered in pre-revolution Iran, thereby contributing to the modernization of Persia. However, being a post-Abrahamic faith in its origin, the Islamic clergy viewed the Baha'is as apostates and an enemy of Islam, which led to the persistent targeting and attacks on the Baha'is over the faith's origin and as an essentially incompatible and contradictory disposition in the Baha'is–*ulema* relations. While the pre-revolution Iran show an *ulema*–monarchy convergence in their attack on the Baha'is, the post-revolution Iran witnessed the same through consolidation of state–*ulema* powers in the form of the new Islamic Republic. The discrimination and persecutions of the Baha'is in the post-1979 Iran increased considerably, and one can witness a deviation of the homogenous perception on the Baha'is by the religious clergy class. The conservative reformist faction of the *ulema* has given rise to newer and opposing perspectives on the Baha'is, the largest non-recognized religious minority in Iran.

Keywords

Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali Khamenei, *ulema*, reformists, recognized religious minorities

Introduction

Baha'ism emerged as a result of two social movements in the nineteenth-century Persia—Shaikh'ism and Bab'ism, where the latter's proponents expected the return of the hidden Imam—the *Mahdi*. In 1863, Seyyed Ali Muhammad Shirazi

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(1819–1850) or better known as Mirza Hussein Ali Nuri, also known as Baha'ullah (1817–1892) informed his close followers that he was the messianic figure promised by the Bab or “He Whom God Shall Make Manifest.” Soon after the declaration was made public in 1867, Baha'ism as a new faith saw its growth and popularity across the country and to other regions neighboring Persia. The rapid spread of the movement posed a threat to the authoritative monopolistic positions of the *ulema* who sought to confront the new threat of “heresy,” cautiously and gradually, by joining hands with the secular authorities. However, a few sections of *mullahs* (low-level clergy) were sympathizers of Baha'i movement which made room for interaction between ideologies belonging to Shi'i and other views. The changing scenarios of the late nineteenth century, ranging from the emergence of Baha'ism to changes in the attitudes of rulers, resulted in a slight adaptation by the *ulema* although acceptance of Baha'ism as a new faith was never considered.

Due to its post-Abrahamic origin, Baha'ism as a faith finds no mention or recognition in the Islamic concept of People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*) or *dhimmi* which includes only Jews, Christians, Sabaeans, and Zoroastrians. The People of the Book are the only recognized religions within the Islamic context with the status of *dhimmi*. Under the Covenant of Omar, *dhimmi* are guaranteed protection of their life, body, property, freedom of movement, and religious practice, and in return they are required to observe the Islamic regulations closely. This Islamic concept laid the foundation for the recognized religious minorities (RRMs) in the Islamic Republic of Iran and rights of the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians are guaranteed in the constitution of 1979. On the contrary, Baha'is are considered as *murtad* (apostate), who were not recognized as *dhimmi* and are not given any protection in the constitution and hence whose blood can be shed and whose property belonged to no one and thus can be plundered.

The Islamic Revolution merged the state and the *ulema* (clergy), making Iran closer to a theocracy which affected the already discriminated position of the Baha'is through non-recognition, systematic persecutions, arbitrary arrests, confiscation, and destruction of Baha'i properties and torture and executions. The immediate aftermath of the Islamic Revolution saw attempts by the new regime to eradicate Baha'i institutions completely. The nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is were arrested on 21 August 1980 (*The New York Times*, 1983a) and their fate remains unknown since then. Followers of the faith were particularly targeted whereby their businesses and trade licenses were revoked, government employees were expelled, pensions were canceled, properties were destroyed, and children were denied education (Warburg, 2006). Moreover, the house of the Bab in Shiraz, the holiest shrine for the Baha'is, was bulldozed (*The New York Times*, 1983a).

The Islamic Revolution and its aftermath reflected the worst scenario for the Baha'is of Iran, with which they are still coping. Soon after 1979, Baha'is were accused of being spies of countries such as Russia, the United Kingdom, the USA, Spain, and Israel. According to a CIA estimate, in 2011 Baha'is were the largest non-Muslim minority in Iran, with estimated adherents of 300,000–350,000 out of the total population of 80.8 million. However, no official Iranian estimate of

Baha'is is available, since they do not enjoy the official status of RRM. Instead, they are perceived as a "misguided sect," having ties with Zionism, the Pahlavi regime and an associate of the notorious erstwhile SAVAK (National Intelligence and Security Organization of the Shah regime; Baha'i International Community [BIC], 2011, p. 10).

Baha'ism, being a non-clerical faith, is heavily dependent on their national and local spiritual assemblies for carrying out the proper conduct of the faith. The absence of these institutions as a result of the 1983 ban became a threat to the existence of the community (United Nations Economic and Social Council [UNECOSOC], 1996, para. 59). The clergy, alarmed by the influence Baha'ism has in Iran and beyond the region, made repeated attempts to stop the Baha'is through targeting and destroying its leadership and by believing that such measures would coerce the followers to recant their faith (BIC, 2008, p. 44). While the official policy toward the Baha'is seems to be unchanged, the responses from other sources, such as the Iranian scholars, intellectuals, and activists have been diverse. Unlike the presumed homogenous views on Baha'is by the Iranian *ulema*, diversity of perceptions on the Baha'is also can be found.

Ulema–Monarchy Equation on Baha'is: Historical Background

The 1950s witnessed the clergy's concern for the growing influence of the Baha'i community in the sociopolitical sphere of the country as they started gaining prominent administrative positions (Schwerin, 2015, p. 16). The second Pahlavi ruler Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919–1980) brought about the resurgence of Shi'i clergy in the political scenario that was long blurred during his predecessor Reza Shah's tenure (1925–1941). However, this resurgence did not secure for the *ulema* (religious scholars) any government posts or party memberships, although prominent *ulema* became ideological leaders of the newer political developments that the tenure witnessed (Martin, 1984, p. 21). Taking advantage of political developments like nationalization of Anglo-Iranian Oil project (1951) by Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh (1882–1967) and Iran's decision of joining the Baghdad Pact (1955) and in order to keep Iranian public attention away, there was an unspoken Shah-*ulema* rapprochement which bore most fruitful on the Baha'i question (Martin, 1984, p. 22).

This was reflected in 1955 during the month of Ramadan when preacher Hujjatu-i Islam Muhammad-Taqi Falsafi (1908–1998), with the prior consent of the *Marja-itaqlid* (highest ranking authority of the Twelver Shi'i community) Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Borujerdi (1875–1961), delivered a series of sermons in the Tehran mosque against the Baha'i community. Among others, he called for the suppression of the "false religion" which he portrayed as dangerous for the welfare of the people (Martin, 1984, p. 22). Active anti-Baha'i propaganda soon started via national radio and official newspapers, provoking widespread attack against the community throughout the country. One of the consequences of this

was the active participation of the Chief of Staff of the Army General Nader Batmanghelich and military commander of Tehran General Taymour Bakhtiar in demolishing the holy dome of the Baha'i center in Tehran with pickaxes in front of domestic and foreign reporters (Fischer, 1980, p. 187). Moreover, Prime Minister Hossein Ala' (1881–1964) told parliament that Baha'i activities would be outlawed in the country (Fischer, 1980, p. 187). These showed the backing of the Pahlavi regime for such attacks on the Baha'is.

Ayatollah Borujerdi was the one expressing his dissatisfaction to Falsafi in a letter about the relative freedom being enjoyed by the Baha'is throughout the country and instructed Falsafi to have prior consent from the Shah about his anti-Baha'i campaigns, to which the Shah consented (Choubine, 2008, p. 7). Such was the priority to fight the Baha'is that Borujerdi, few years before 1955 incident, had sent his students during the periods of Ramadan and Muharram to various towns and villages to preach and spread hatred against the Baha'is (Schwerin, 2015, p. 16). According to Bahram Choubine (2008), these activities by the clergies were not just an effort of securing “the foundation of the luminous religion of Islam,” but rather a portrayal of their actual participation behind the 1953 coup d'état¹ and Shah's restoration to his throne (Choubine, 2008, p. 12).

The Shah-*ulema* rapprochement, therefore, started following the 1953 coup, and this was reflected in the exchange of communications between Ayatollah Borujerdi and the new ruler, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. In one such letter addressed to the Shah and the new Prime Minister Hossein Ala' on 29 June 1954, Borujerdi made the following suggestions with regard to the Baha'i community and called on the monarchy to modify the constitution through parliamentary actions:

1. The Baha'i sect must be prevented from propagation [of its teachings] which is against the luminous religion of Islam.
2. Their centers and gatherings, wherever found across the country, must be closed.
3. Any government worker who is not one of the religions mentioned in the Constitution must be expelled after due investigation. Consequently, the Baha'is would fall into this category [and be expelled] (Choubine, 2008, p. 12).

Shaikh Hussein-Ali Montazeri (1922–2009), a zealous seminarian under the tutelage of Ayatollah Borujerdi, had knowledge of the works and writings of the Baha'is which he utilized effectively when he was sent to Najafabad in 1955 to agitate against the Baha'is. Taking Borujerdi's suggestions of Muslims' treatment toward the Baha'is, namely, refraining from any association, relationship, and dealings with them, Montazeri convinced several representatives in Najafabad to sign a proclamation whereby they would refrain from serving the Baha'is. Borujerdi's suggestion was also disseminated in mosques and other public places.

This resulted in tremendous inconvenience for the Baha'is, making the situation tense in Najafabad and which forced them into hiding (Schwerin, 2015, p. 16). Montazeri's propaganda bore fruit with the destruction of the Baha'i center of Najafabad in 1955 (Choubine, 2008, p. 18). The hostility was sought to be extended

in Isfahan as well, even though it became unsuccessful due to lack of support from both clergy and the people. The Isfahani governor summoned Montazeri whereby his anti-Baha'i agitation was put to an end (Schwerin, 2015, p. 16).

Following the 1955 unrest, Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammad Behbahani (1874–1963), Tehran's leading *mujtahid* (specialist in religious law), congratulated both the Shah and Ayatollah Borujerdi via telegram for the destruction and closing of the Baha'i center in Tehran which he termed as "center of religious and national sedition" (Choubine, 2008, p. 14). He also praised the Iranian army *asartish-i-Islam* or "army of Islam" (Algar, 1989). Behbahani expressed his belief in the requirement of a cordial *ulema*–monarchy relation and assured his faithful support to the Shah with the suggestion that the day of the destruction of the Baha'i center of Tehran be observed as a religious holiday from its first anniversary (Akhavi, 1980, p. 77). The Shah's warm response was that, "...we consider ourselves bound to carry out the requirements of Islam and beseech the Almighty to continue confirming us in the undertaking" (Choubine, 2008, p. 14), while refraining at the same time, any mention of his personal feelings toward the Baha'is or on the allegations against them by the *ulema* (Akhavi, 1980, p. 78).

The aftermath of the 1953 coup also witnessed the establishment of a fundamentalist Islamic association—the Hojratieh Society—by a prominent cleric in the name Shaikh Mahmud Zekrzade Tavalli, better known as Shaikh Mahmud Halabi (1900–1998). Also known as the "anti-Baha'i society," the Hojratieh's explicit goal was training "scientific defense" of Shi'i Islam against the theological challenges from the Baha'is (Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre [IHRDC], 2006, p. 12). The reason behind Halabi's foundation of such an organization originated from his personal experience where his colleague Sayyid Abbas Alawi was converted to that faith following his contact with a Baha'i missionary. This prompted Halabi to study the Baha'i history and its original texts to provide a "comprehensive Islamic response to the Baha'i challenge" (Sadri, 2004). The Hojratieh was endorsed by clerics such as Ayatollah Borujerdi, Ayatollah Mara'shi Najafi, Ayatollah Milani, Seyyed Abdullah Shirazi, and Ayatollah Baha'eddin Mahallati. Allegedly prominent members of the Society, the present Supreme Leader Seyyed Ali Khamenei, former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, and former Minister of Education and President Mohammad Ali Raja'i obtained powerful positions after the Islamic Revolution (IHRDC, 2006, p. 12).

In its anti-Baha'i activities, the Hojratieh was backed not only by the *ulema* but also worked in close cooperation with the police and the SAVAK (Pahlavi regime's intelligence agency) in its activities such as publication of anti-Baha'i pamphlets, denunciation of Baha'is to the authorities, and forceful disruption of Baha'i gatherings (Kazemzadeh, 2000, p. 540). It is reported that under the Shah, Halabi asked for SAVAK's cooperation to obtain information of every citizen's religious affiliation through the enforcement of Civil Service Code that required identification of religious affiliation of every applicant and employee (IHRDC, 2006, p. 13). The Hojratieh played an active role in purging the Baha'is from every sphere after the Islamic Revolution. However, 5 years after the Islamic Revolution, the Hojratieh Society was rebuffed by the authorities (Sadri, 2004) and vanished from the

political scene, even though its presence in the conservative faction of the Islamic regime allegedly continues even today (IHRDC, 2006, p. 14).

The *ulema*-Shah rapprochement was short-lived due to the international pressure on the Shah with respect to the monarch's dealing with the persecution and violence against the country's Baha'i community. Even though the *ulema* wanted to push for legislative measures to outlaw the Baha'i faith and expel its followers from the country, the government refused to comply with such demand due to the international recognition and condemnation of anti-Baha'i violence (Yazdani, 2012, p. 596). Therefore, this non-compliance breached their close collaboration, giving rise to resentment that saw its final escalation in the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Ayatollahs' Take on the Baha'is After 1979

Even before becoming Islamic Republic of Iran's first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989) voiced his anti-Baha'i stand as early as in autumn of 1962, when Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's government promulgated new laws concerning the local and provincial council elections by amending the former requirement of those elected to be sworn into office on Quran (Iran Chamber Society, n.d.). In a telegram to both the monarch and the then Prime Minister Amir Asadollah Alam (1962–1964), Khomeini warned them of committing the sin of going against the laws of Islam and the 1907 constitution of Iran and this would eventually trigger *ulema*'s sustained protest campaigns against the Shah (Iran Chamber Society, n.d.). Despite such a warning, the government went ahead with the promulgation and the *ulema* across the country joined the protest campaign. They were successful in repealing the law within 7 weeks (IHRDC, 2006, p. 15). Since then, Khomeini's anti-Baha'i speeches continued until the revolution and even after, alleging them to be a creation of the foreign powers "Remind the people of the danger posed by Israel and its agents. Recall and explain the catastrophes inflicted upon Islam by the Jews and the Baha'is" (IHRDC, 2006, p. 15).

The resentment against Baha'ism that had its origin on theological grounds gradually took a new disposition based on nationalist sentiments. Apart from being un-Islamic, the Baha'is were accused and attacked for their unpatriotic nature, for being agents of foreign powers—the United Kingdom, the USA, and Israel (Kazemzadeh, 2000, p. 540). Such a perception of the Baha'is was reflected in Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989). In December 1978, in his interview with Ayatollah Khomeini, James Cockroft of Rutgers University asked whether there would be "either religious or political freedom for Baha'is under an Islamic government." Ayatollah Khomeini replied, "... they are a political faction; they are harmful. They will not be accepted." When Cockroft further asked, "How about their freedom of religion practice?" "No," said the Ayatollah (Yazdani, 2012, p. 593).

Khomeini repeated his stand on the Baha'i faith in 1983, in his criticism of the then American President Ronald Reagan (1981–1989) who conveyed his support for the Iranian Baha'is and expressed being "alarmed and dismayed" at the arrest

and persecution of the Iranian Baha'is, urging the Iranian government to halt its plan of executing 22 Iranian Baha'is (*The New York Times*, 1983b). Calling the Baha'is agents backed by foreign powers, Khomeini questioned Reagan's support for a group "who do not even belong to any religion and are only here at the order of their masters to work for them" (*The New York Times*, 1983b).

Soon after the Islamic Revolution, the *ulema* became active in purging the Baha'i community which also took the form of the official policy of the regime (BIC, 2008, p. 43). One of the first steps of ulema's prejudicial treatment toward the Baha'is post-revolution was done by a clerical organization that goes by the name "The Foundation of the Dispossessed." This organization, in a letter, claimed its title to all Baha'i-owned properties on 23 March 1979. The letter also gave property ownership of the holiest Baha'i shrine in Iran, the House of Bab, to a renowned cleric by the name Sayekh Sadeq Khalkhali (Kazemzadeh, 2000, p. 542). The shrine was demolished by a mob led by clerics and the officials of the Department of Religious Affairs in September (Kazemzadeh, 2000, p. 542). In the next few years, Iran's leading *mujtahids* (religious scholars authorized to pass legal judgments) permitted the confiscation of Baha'is private properties, such as, homes, shops, and agricultural lands, which started to affect the economic condition of the Baha'is immensely (Kazemzadeh, 2000, p. 542).

This position of the Islamic government toward the Baha'is not only gets reflected in its attitude but also in its legal enforcement. In 1991, the Iranian Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council (ISRCC) drew a memorandum on the "Baha'i Question" which referred to the general status of Baha'is in the country, as well as their cultural, educational, legal, and social status. Dated 25 February 1991, this document which was stamped "confidential" was drawn up at the request of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (b. 1939) and President Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1934–2017). At the bottom of the document was the signature of Hujjatu'i Islam Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, Secretary of the Council, along with the approval and signature of Khamenei himself (Momen, 2005, p. 227). The memorandum proposes reasonable ways to deal with the treatment toward the Baha'i community "in such a way that everyone will understand what should or should not be done" (Kazemzadeh, 2000, p. 553) and that "their progress and development are blocked" (BIC, 2008, p. 21).

The major summary of the memorandum is as follows:

1. General status of the Baha'is within the country's system:
 - a. They will not be expelled from the country without reason.
 - b. They will not be arrested, imprisoned, or penalized without reason.
 - c. The government's dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked.
2. Educational and cultural status:
 - a. They can be enrolled in schools provided they have not identified themselves as Baha'is.
 - b. Preferably, they should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing religious ideology.

- c. They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Baha'is.
 - d. Their political (espionage) activities must be dealt with according to appropriate government laws and policies, and their religious and propaganda activities should be answered by giving them religious and cultural responses, as well as propaganda.
 - e. Propaganda institutions (such as the Islamic Propaganda Organization) must establish an independent section to counter the propaganda and religious activities of the Baha'is.
 - f. A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country.
3. Legal and social status:
- a. Permit them a modest livelihood as is available to the general population.
 - b. To the extent that it does not encourage them to be Baha'is, it is permissible to provide them the means for ordinary living in accordance with the general rights given to every Iranian citizen, such as ration booklets, passports, burial certificates, work permits, and so on.
 - c. Deny them employment if they identify themselves as Baha'is.
 - d. Deny them any position of influence, such as in the educational sector, and so on (BIC, 2008, p. 22).

This memorandum came to the attention of the international community in 1993 when it was disclosed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur (UNSR). However, the Iranian government claimed that this document was a forgery, though various international human rights organizations and the UN have verified its authenticity (BIC, 2016, p. 8). Nevertheless, the revelation of this document has put Iran under greater scrutiny of the international community, and the situation of the Baha'is since then has somewhat improved even though the memorandum remains in force.

On 31 July 2013, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei issued a *fatwa* (verdict) against the Baha'i community, calling it "deviant and misleading cult" and urged Iranians to avoid any dealings or association with the Baha'i members (Mamouri, 2013). In another undated *fatwa*, Khamenei condemned the "perverse" Baha'i sect as "blasphemous and ritually unclean" and warned that any food items and other objects touched by them should be avoided and further mentioned that it was incumbent upon the Muslim believers "to counteract the machinations and perversity of this misguided sect" (BIC, 2016, p. 14). Khamenei reiterated his anti-Baha'i feelings in another speech in Qom, Iran's premier religious center, on 19 October 2010, that was broadcast across the country through Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcaster (IRIB), Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), national television, and the government's official news agency. The speech was mainly focused on the enemies of Iran and of Islam whose main targets, he said, revolve around people's faith and their devotion to the Islamic Revolution (BIC, 2011, p. 6). Emphasizing

the failure of the enemies in creating a rift between the nation and the officials of the Islamic Republic, Khamenei blamed the enemies of the nation for “sowing the seed of pessimism” and raising doubts on religious values with the intention of weakening the pillars of people’s faith “especially the young generation through promoting immorality, false Sufism, promotion of Baha’ism and promotion of home-based churches” (BIC, 2011, p. 6).

Another prominent ayatollah known widely for his anti-Baha’i opinions is Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi (b. 1953). A hardliner cleric, Yazdi is known for his views of using force and violence against anyone who, he believes, has not been behaving according to the expectations of the ruling cleric and called human rights including the ban on the use of violence, as anti-Quranic. His hardline ideology was partly behind the establishment of the Hojjatieh organization in the 1960s and 1970s that emerged to fight Baha’is in Iran (Mohammadi, 2015, p. 143). He stood by his anti-Baha’i approach even after the 1979 Revolution. A strong advocate of using “sacred violence” against the secularists, atheists, converts, dissidents to clean the society, Yazdi also holds a belief in the first and second order of citizenship.

The first order of citizenship rests with the true Shi’a Muslim men (as from the militarist point of view, Muslim women and non-Muslims fall under the second order of citizens), supporters of the Islamic government, the idea of the guardianship of the jurist consult, and the existing ruling jurist while the rest fall under the second order of citizenship (Mohammadi, 2015, p. 152). In short, non-Muslims, according to him, are not entitled to the same rights and responsibilities enjoyed by a Muslim in Iran. He also said that citizenship rights rest in Islam, and therefore, equality between Baha’is and Muslims is unacceptable as the former has no relation to Islam (*Sen’s Daily*, 2014). The second order of citizens, he believes, “deserve to be killed by a person who is loyal to the government” and in case the person “decides to kill someone who he thinks is a non-Muslim and does not obey the orders of a true Muslim, and carries out the execution himself, he shall be acquitted by the court” (Mohammadi, 2015, p. 153). In addressing students at a theological seminary in Qom in 2000, Yazdi openly rejected the slogan “Iran belongs to all Iranians” and questioned if believing in “Iran belongs to all Iranians” mean “a Baha’i is equal with a religious authority [a mullah],” or whether it would mean “a Baha’i can be a president because he is a human being and an Iranian” (Kazemzadeh, 2000, p. 557).

The question of citizenship rights, or rather the denial of one, for the Iranian Baha’is was also dealt by Ayatollah Mohammad Mousavi Bojnourdi (b. 1942), one of Khomeini’s students in Najaf. He was a high-ranking cleric and a two-time member of the former Supreme Judicial Council until its dissolution in 1989. Weeks after a statement made by the Head of Iranian Judiciary’s Human Rights Council Mohammad Javad Larijani’s where he denied any form of systemic discrimination toward the Baha’is by means of denying their right to higher education, Ayatollah Bojnourdi responded forcefully. In an interview to the *Fars News Agency*, on 15 December 2014, he stated, “we never say that Baha’is have the right to education; Baha’is don’t even have citizenship rights”

(Centre for Human Rights in Iran, 2014). He further added that citizenship rights are enjoyed by Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, who have parliamentary representations due to them being the Abrahamic religions and “we engage with them and their representatives are our friends” (Centre for Human Rights in Iran, 2014). Following unfavorable reactions, Bojnourdi clarified his comment to be for those Baha’is in cooperation with Israel and those advocating against Islam. While agreeing on Baha’is having human rights, Bojnourdi was of the opinion that privileges such as university education in Iran cannot be accessible by the Baha’is (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHCR], 2015, para. 51).

The clerical stand on the Baha’is after the revolution, therefore, seems to revolve around the question of “purity,” citizenship rights and their loyalty toward the regime. This attitude toward the Baha’is by the leading ayatollahs, including its Supreme Leaders, is also reflected in the official policy with respect to treatment of the non-recognized religious minority of Iran, the Baha’is. The strong clergy–government nexus established after the revolution has further deteriorated the living condition of Baha’is in the country.

Dissident Views on Baha’is

Amidst the pessimist picture of clergy–Baha’i relations in the Islamic Republic, there is also a moderate/reformist section of the *ulema* who differ from the official position and publicly expressed their dissent. One of the first clerics of post-1979 who spoke for the Baha’is was Ayatollah Shaikh Hussein-Ali Montazeri (1922–2009), the same high ranking cleric behind the Najafabad unrest in 1955, who was initially designated as Ayatollah Khomeini’s successor. In 2008, Ayatollah Montazeri issued a *fatwa* that called for the respect of the Iranian Baha’is as rightful citizens of the country, a historic statement that no other cleric had dared to issue (Moin, 2009, p. 3). Ayatollah Montazeri also opined that the human rights and civil rights of the non-Muslim Iranians have to be respected, implying that the Baha’is, too, have the same rights as other “religious minorities.” Although not regarded to be part of the “People of the Book,” the Baha’is are, nevertheless, Iranians who have the “same rights to water and soil” (Pistor-Hatam, 2017, p. 7).

What needs attention here is that although Montazeri spoke for Baha’is citizenship rights which should also “benefit from Islamic compassion,” he seem to mention that Baha’is do not have any holy book like the ones in Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism (Archives of Baha’i Persecution in Iran [ABPI], 2008). Montazeri refused to recognize *Kitab-e-Aqdas* as a holy book. In 2009, he addressed the question of Baha’is where he viewed that Baha’is are a “wayward sect” (*ferqeh-ye zalleh-ye baha’iye*) like those not belonging to the heavenly faiths (*adyan-e asemani*). However, he advocated for the treatment of the Baha’is to be in accordance with the Quran and the teachings of Imam Ali (Pistor-Hatam, 2017, p. 6). In this very address, Montazeri dealt with two subjects—*mohareb* (a person who wages war) and *mofsed* (those who are corrupt)—in Shi’i jurisprudence; according to him, these offenses are not applicable to the sect that is Baha’i,

notwithstanding the fact that Baha'is are viewed as apostates for not accepting the finality of the Prophet of Islam (ABPI, 2009). What seems clear is that although Montazeri's views changed from being one of Khomeini's loyalists to the one against the *velayat-e-faqih* (Islamic jurisprudence) after the Islamic Revolution, his opinion on the Baha'is as apostates and belonging to "wayward sect" remained intact, although he opined for a humane treatment of the Baha'is in the country in accordance with Islamic teachings.

One of the *ulema* to write on the civil and human rights of the Iranian Baha'i community, Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari (b. 1950), an Iranian cleric, researcher, journalist, and reformist, has been called an "unorthodox" for his progressive views and had been jailed for several years. With regard to the question of the discriminations the Baha'is of Iran face, Eshkevari expressed his helplessness to comprehend and respond to why Baha'is who "probably belong to the distant past and do not interfere in the affairs of the living, particularly the rulers, but who are nevertheless faced with attacks, destruction, and disdain" (Iran Press Watch [IPW], 2009a). However, while addressing the Baha'i question later, Eshkevari stated that throughout the history of humankind, the "followers of the prevailing religion label heterodox thinkers who exit their religion as heretics and apostates and ultimately consider them as enemies of God, enemies of their prophet, and enemies of their legitimate devout governing bodies," thinking of this as a religious obligation to attain God (IPW, 2009b).

However, what at the beginning was a mere religious issue, gradually with time, became a political, economic, social, and even personal factor that lies behind the persistence of violence. The Baha'is in Iran face a similar case, too. The reason behind the quietism on the Baha'i issue from the non-religious group and researchers in Iran who do not address this question openly is the result of a taboo. Besides, the ongoing wide-scale censorship and boycott of the Baha'i literature and teachings based on accurate and trustworthy information about the faith remain non-existent. Eshkevari mentioned that broad-minded responsible Iranian people should forgo this boycott and censorship and researchers should "investigate Baha'is ideologies and to end this void and poverty of accurate information" (IPW, 2009b).

Ayatollah Bayat Zanjani (b. 1941), grand *marja* (religious reference) of Iran and an Islamic philosopher, addressed a question regarding a *fatwa* issued by an *ulema* that those conducting business with the Baha'is, or lending support to them by any other means, are considered *mohareb* (a person who wages war), and in case of extensive activities, they are considered *mofsed* (those who are corrupt), and therefore, subject to punishment under religious law. On being asked whether he approves of the said *fatwa*, Zanjani he responded that all Iranians are entitled to their citizenship rights and as long as security has not been breached or arms were not taken by any individual, that person cannot be considered a *mohareb*. However, Zanjani believes Baha'ism to be born out of colonialism rather than an independent movement. In his answer, he encouraged partnership with the Baha'is to be continued if one believes that such partnership can emanate an influence on partner's ideology "and lead him towards the

Shi'ite religion," or otherwise, "take a course of action that would strengthen the faith of your co-religionists" (ABPI, n.d.).

One of the main factors behind discriminations toward the Baha'i community by the Iranian cleric is the question of purity. There are three types of *fatwas* that deals with the subject of purity of the non-Muslims. The first type is the one where all non-Muslims fall under the category of impurity, the second considers only the non-Muslims who are People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitab*) to be pure while the rest non-Muslims to be impure. The third category considers every people, irrespective of their religious beliefs, to be ritually pure. Mohammad Taghi Fazel Meybodi, a reformist cleric at the Shi'ite seminary in Qom, is an adherent of the third category. Impurity, according to him, is only ritual impurity through contamination with "objects that are considered impure in Islam such as blood or a dead body" (IPW, 2014).

Ayatollah Hossein Kazemeyni Boroujerdi (b. 1958), an Iranian cleric known for his open opposition to the clerical regime in Iran based on the concept of *velayat-e-faqih*, and a strong advocate for the separation of state and religion, is another cleric who faced the wrath of the clerical regime for his open criticisms which began in 1994. He was arrested in October 2006, initially being accused of charges like *moharebeh* (warring against God), challenging the political leadership of the Supreme Leader and connection with anti-revolutionaries and espionage by the Special Clerical Court (SCC) (Tavaana, 2017). In 2010, Boroujerdi wrote an open letter to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), addressing the many ways the clerical regime in Iran has oppressed voices of dissent in the country. In this letter, he addressed the treatment of the minority communities by the clerical regime and wrote:

The unpopular regime in Iran which is a clear example of a theocracy has no respect or belief in freedom of thought, expression or belief. In such an atmosphere, religious minorities – Zoroastrians, Sunnis, Christians, Jews and Baha'is in addition to Sufis and Dervishes including the majority of Shiites believers who are opposed to the 'Doctrine of *Velayate Faghih*' (Rule of the Jurisprudent) are constantly harassed and repressed. With the slightest of objections or expressions of criticism, these people are immediately arrested on trumped-up charges and tried without due representation before courts that have no legitimacy and make a mockery of justice. (*Bam Azadi*, 2010)

The most unprecedented step, however, came from Ayatollah Abdolhamid Masoumi-Tehrani, based in Tehran, who met Baha'i activists in 2013 following the murder of a Baha'i member Ata'ollah Rezvani in Bandar Abbas in southern Iran. He stated that no person has the right to deny any individual of his/her personal and social rights who "has not interfered with another person's life, property, honor or reputation" (IHRDC, 2013). He argued that in the modern world, human rights are what every human being is entitled to, irrespective of belief, ethnicity, or gender and it is the government's responsibility to defend every citizen's personal and social rights without any exceptions (IHRDC, 2013). In April 2014, Ayatollah Masoumi-Tehrani presented an intricate calligraphic

work of a passage from *Kitab-e-Aqdas*, Baha'is holy book, in support of the Iranian Baha'i community, hoping the gift to be kept in the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Baha'i faith, headquartered in Haifa, Israel (Shahrabi, 2014). The gift, in his statement, is

an expression of sympathy and care from me on behalf of all my open-minded fellow citizens who respect others for their humanity and not for their religion or way of worship—to all the Baha'is of the world, particularly to the Baha'is of Iran who have suffered in manifold ways as a result of blind religious prejudice. (Shahrabi, 2014)

On being asked in an interview about the reactions from the Iranian clergy and the elite regarding Baha'is, his response was that the even though there are Iranian clergies who believe in equal treatment for the Baha'is like any other citizens in the country, such views are not something which is expressed in the open. While acknowledging that the clerics present in the government showed their displeasure for Ayatollah's gift to the Baha'i community, clerics such as Ayatollah Sanei and Makarem Shirazi believe that defending Baha'is rights deserve support (Akhlaghi, 2014). However, in the interview, Tehrani did not show optimism for any reconciliation between the state ideology and the Baha'i community, due to the former's "particular reading of Islam based on Shi'a jurisprudence of *velayat-e-faqih*" that does not show tolerance for any dissent, even the ones within the Shi'i clerics (Akhlaghi, 2014). A strong believer of separation of clergy and politics, Ayatollah Tehrani believes that the rights of the minorities would fail to be recognized or exercised as long as the state ideology remains to rule over the government institutions and also called out for changes in the constitution to accommodate the rights of the ethnic and religious minorities (Akhlaghi, 2014).

This was not the only instance of Ayatollah Tehrani's vocal and public support for the Iranian Baha'is. In November 2015, he presented another gift of his calligraphy work from Baha'ullah's work *Hidden Words* to the Baha'is arrested in Tehran who had no legal protection. Hoping and demanding an end to atrocities committed by the state authorities against the Baha'is, Ayatollah Tehrani stated that he hopes this gift would raise the conscience of Iranian citizens on focusing attention to divergent ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities in Iran (IPW, 2015). Ayatollah Tehrani is probably one of the first Iranian clerics to acknowledge Baha'ism as an independent religion, having its origin in Iran that suffered discriminations and atrocities since its manifestation, which have only intensified with time. Commemorating the bicentenary of the birth of Bahauallah, the founder of the Baha'i faith, Tehrani delivered a message in October 2017 wherein he stated:

It is unfortunate that due to prejudices, and religious suspicion, the followers of this Faith and this ideology, that has embedded the Iranian culture in the fabric of its moral teachings, are faced with such hostility and discrimination, as well as individual and societal deprivation, in the cradle of its birth. I offer my congratulations, on this Bicentenary Celebration of the Founder and Revealer of the Baha'i Faith, to all followers

of Bahauallah, especially my fellow compatriots. I am hopeful that this ideological disease, that has plagued our region for many years, which claims: “all those who don’t match my thinking and don’t share my religious ideology, should be destitute and deprived of all their individual and societal rights”; be elevated, with utmost urgency, in mindfulness and social awareness so that the worth and station of individuals can be identified by their humanity, so that the followers of all religions and Faiths, without any discrimination, enjoy the same dignity and respect, and live side by side in peace and harmony. (IPW, 2017)

Conclusion

Since the inception of the faith, Baha’ism has received backlash and non-recognition as an independent religion in the country of its birth. Until now, its followers are not given their citizenship rights, and the hatred and violence that intensified since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 make it difficult for Baha’is to reveal their faith in public. The backlash toward the faith came mostly from the *ulema* class, who initially viewed the growing popularity of Baha’ullah as a threat to their significance. Political regimes changed, newer constitutions were written, but the fate of the Baha’is remained same but rather deteriorated since 1979. *Ulema* take on the Baha’is, too, witnessed a changed disposition—from theological challenge to challenge to national security. While the official policy toward the Baha’is is one of non-recognition, antagonism, and otherization, it is difficult to believe such a policy will see any hopeful change in the near future.

A positive change, nevertheless, has ensued with the public addresses of the moderate/reformist *ulema* in Iran. With reinterpretations, these dissident *ulema* are expressing views on the questions that Baha’is are called to be an apostate by the conservative section of the *ulema*, namely, on the question of purity and citizenship. A section of the *ulema* can now be seen to recognize the citizenship rights and civil and human rights that the Iranian Baha’is are entitled to in the country. Different views were also given on the question of “purity” whereby this section of *ulema* normalized the civility of the Baha’is, thus making an effort to remove the “othering” tag and taboo about conducting any form of contact/association with the Baha’is. However, the take on Baha’ism as a religion still varies among these *ulema*. Demand for equal rights and treatment does not necessarily equate to the recognition of Baha’ism as an independent religion. Moderate *ulema* take on the theological aspect of Baha’is are mostly unaddressed, although there seems to be a recognition of the persecution the Baha’is face at the hands of the Islamic regime and the understanding of the necessity for humane treatment and recognition of the Baha’is as equal Iranian citizens.

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1. Also known as the 28 Mordad coup, the 1953 coup d'état in Iran witnessed the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh on 19 August 1953. A military one replaced Mosaddegh's democratically elected government. Intelligence agencies of foreign powers—the USA and the United Kingdom—were behind the 1953 coup which was carried under the name TPAJAX Project (by the USA) and Operation Boot (by the UK). The consequence of this was the strengthening of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's monarchical rule by putting an end to the democratically elected parliamentary form of government in the country, with the support of foreign allies. This form of rule continued until its overthrow in the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Mossadegh Foundation, n.d.).

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