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Disappeared: Voices from a Secret War
JOHN SIMPSON AND JANA BENNETT

JOHN SIMPSON

BEHIND IRANIAN LINES

FONTANA/Collins

To all the good friends in London, Paris and Tehran
who know that this is addressed to them.

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branches of what might be called British intelligence, but none of them is known as 'the BIS'; the most familiar is the Secret Intelligence Service, which is usually known by its initials, SIS, or by its alternative (though no longer accurate) name, MI6. Roger Cooper, as an experienced journalist, must have known this. As it happens, however, there is something called the BIS: the British *Information* Service, which has nothing whatever to do with espionage but provides information abroad about British life and industry.

It had been widely expected that the broadcast would be the prelude to Cooper's release, or else at the worst that he would be charged with espionage. Neither happened. Perhaps a disagreement about his case within the régime prevented his release, or perhaps the authorities were angered by the realization that he had turned his carefully worded confession into a message that he was not, after all, confessing to anything. Roger Cooper remained in Evin Prison, awaiting the decision of a judicial system which seemed to have found him an embarrassment.

In 1982, when he was in Britain, Roger Cooper wrote an influential pamphlet for the Minority Rights Group, a London-based human rights organization, about the persecution of members of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran. He had been, he wrote, initially sceptical that the publication of his report might help the Bahá'ís; but he was persuaded eventually that it would. His authorship of the pamphlet, which received wide attention, may well have added to his difficulties once he was arrested. He wrote of it as follows:

> Although, whether in English or Persian, it is almost certain to be banned in Iran, where mere possession of anything that could be considered 'Bahá'í propaganda' is a dangerous offence, it may be of use to those who meet or have dealings with Iranians abroad . . . Official and unofficial Iranian attitudes towards Bahá'ís are largely (but not exclusively) based on misconceptions, so any attempt to correct these, and thereby perhaps moderate attitudes, is surely worthwhile.

It is always difficult for Westerners to understand the reasons for the depth of feeling that exists in Iran against the Bahá'í Faith. It is a religion of peace and tolerance, it has never advocated violence in Iran or anywhere else, it avoids any forms of political involvement

and the Bahá'ís, who are under instructions to obey the laws of the country in which they live, have maintained their beliefs with great courage in the face of torture and death. And yet several thousand followers of the Faith in its earlier form were killed in Persia in the nineteenth century, while since the 1979 Revolution nearly two hundred Bahá'ís have been executed, and about eight hundred have been imprisoned.

Part of the reason lies in the origins of their religion. It began in the southern Persian city of Shiraz in the 1840s as a development of Shi'a Islam, just acceptable within the boundaries of its teachings, and preaching the imminent coming of the Hidden Imam. But it was very soon accused of heresy, and its central figure, Sayyed Ali Mohammed, who was styled the 'Báb' or Gate (that is, the gateway to communication with the Hidden Imam) was sentenced to death as a heretic in 1848. His execution took place in Tabriz in 1850, and Edward Granville Browne, who was fascinated by the Bábís and their Faith, relates the story, accepted by many Bahá'ís, that the Bábís vanished unhurt after the first volley from the firing-squad, though he was later found and killed at the second attempt.

In 1863 Mirza Hosayn Ali Nuri announced that he himself was Baha'ullah, the Universal Manifestation of God foretold by the Báb. He was exiled to Acre, which was then part of the Turkish province of Syria, and laid the foundations of the modern Bahá'í Faith in his writings there. Its Shi'ite origins had long since ceased to be recognizable, and although the Bahá'ís teach that all revealed religions are true, they maintain that theirs is the one most suited to the modern age. That in itself is total heresy in Islam, which believes that Mohammed is the 'Seal of the Prophets' and that Islam is the final revelation: to suggest that it can be improved upon is the worst form of spiritual error.

The Bahá'ís, however, pressed on with their Faith, stressing the need to improve society through universal education, world peace, and the equality of the sexes, and through living pure and loving lives. They have no priesthood, and no public ritual. Anyone can become a Bahá'í without ceremony, and the choice is a free one; but once made, it is adhered to. There are few if any cases in Iran of Bahá'í giving up their religion, even under torture. Their courage in the face of persecution has always brought them new converts; nowadays there are believed to be between 150,000 and 300,000 of them in Iran. But they are greatly disliked by most Iranians, who

refuse to accept that their Faith constitutes a real religion, and who believe – in the face of all the evidence – that the Bahá'ís were especially favoured by the Shah and were linked with the corruption under his régime; that their religion was instigated and encouraged by the British, as a means of undermining the authority of the Islamic clergy in Iran; and that they are today under the control of Israel.

The Shah certainly allowed the Bahá'ís a measure of protection, and some members of the Faith grew rich under his rule. His long-serving prime minister, Amir Abbas Hoveyda, who was executed after the Revolution, was always regarded as a Bahá'í because his father had been one; but each individual Bahá'í is required to affirm his membership of the Faith, and Hoveyda did not, regarding himself instead as a Muslim. When the Shah turned Iran into a one-party state in 1975, the Bahá'ís, being forbidden to associate with political groups, were often penalized for their refusal to join his Rastakhiz Party.

The supposed links with the British are fictitious. Various British scholars, Edward Granville Browne among them, found the religion interesting and attractive, and devoted study to it. Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'ullah, was given a British knighthood in 1920 for having supported the British cause in Palestine against the Turks during the 1914-18 War. But the Bahá'í Faith owed nothing to British help or British involvement. It arose as an independent entity and has become one of the world's fastest growing religions.

The choice of site for the Bahá'ís' international headquarters in what is now Israel was an historical accident; when Baha'ullah was obliged by the Turks to settle in Acre in 1868, the foundation of the Israeli State still lay eighty years in the future. It is true that before the Revolution Iranian Bahá'ís, as well as being expected to travel to Israel to visit their World Centre in Haifa, were required to send donations to it; but the funds have never been used for political purposes in Israel.

Given the Persian's weakness for conspiracy theories, however, it is not difficult to see how even those who have no love for the Islamic Republic are prepared to regard the Bahá'ís as a subversive force. Before the Revolution, in the atmosphere of nationalism which the Shah fostered, the Bahá'ís were unpopular for the international nature of their doctrines; since the Revolution, they have paid the penalty for being heterodox at a time of fierce religious orthodoxy.

Bahá'ís, under Muslim law, are *mahdur al-damm*: those whose blood can be shed with impunity. The official media vilify the Bahá'ís as corrupt and treacherous, and as agents of Zionism; but the Imam Khomeini himself, though bitterly opposed to the Bahá'í Faith, has never attacked it as he has the Kurds or the Mojaheddin. As with so many other things in Iran the persecution is neither officially sponsored nor officially condemned; the initiative is left with the more violent of the mullahs and the local *Komitehs*, and nothing is done to curb their excesses.

The National Spiritual Assembly which constitutes the leadership of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran, and the Local Spiritual Assemblies from which it is elected, have been an especial target. In August 1980 all nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly, together with two officials, disappeared. A little over a year later the nine who replaced them were arrested and executed. In 1981 two members of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Shiraz were executed, and in January 1982 six members of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Tehran and the woman in whose house they were meeting were shot. In June 1983 seventeen Bahá'ís, including seven women and three teenage girls, were arrested in Shiraz. Several of them, both men and women, were tortured in an attempt to get them to renounce their faith or to provide video-taped confessions that they had been spies and that the Bahá'í Faith in general was involved in espionage for Israel. They refused. All seventeen were hanged.

The régime as such may not have instituted this pogrom against the Bahá'ís, but it has taken administrative measures against them which amount to full-scale persecution. As a community, they pay great attention to the education of their children, which helps to explain why the Bahá'ís have been so successful in Iranian life. For some years schools have been instructed to demand evidence that children belong to one of the formally recognized religions (Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity) before they can be enrolled. Bahá'í wedding services are not accepted as lawful by the Islamic Republic, so that individual members must either deny their Faith and marry according to the rites of a recognized religion, or they must live in what the state regards as sin: an offence which theoretically renders them liable to whipping, or even stoning to death.

By July 1982 the government had dismissed all the Bahá'ís it employed in the civil service, and no longer paid the retirement

pensions of Bahá'ís. In 1985 it went even further by announcing that civil servants who were Bahá'ís would be required to repay the full amount of the salaries they had received during their entire working lives; many, unable to pay, had been imprisoned. But these administrative measures, cruel as they are, seem gradually to be taking the place of the more brutal persecution of the Bahá'ís; as with other aspects of life, the fire has diminished somewhat during the latter part of the 1980s. Nevertheless hatred of the Bahá'ís is not something which was introduced by the Islamic Republic, and it will not fade altogether.

'Being a Bahá'í must be like being a black in America.' The feeling of being discriminated against of being despised, of being perpetually in danger of random attack, was real enough, though the analogy would have been more exact if the speaker had likened himself and his family to Jews in a mediaeval city. All his life he had been treated by ordinary Muslims as an outcast: as someone to be avoided where possible, and a convenient scapegoat at moments of social and political tension.

> I remember one time when we were in a village. I was seven or eight. We had a driver, and we gave him some ice to take home to his family because it was a very hot day. I went with the driver when he took the car home and gave the ice to his wife. I saw her throw the ice out and shout out something about Bahá'ís.
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> Sometimes my father would come home and say he had met so-and-so, and after they had shaken hands he would see him go off to wash his hands. It was a ritual washing, like when a dog passes a Muslim in the street before prayers. Other times when you went to someone's house you knew that after you left they would wash out the chair you had sat on, and the cup you had used. It was always worse in smaller places where there was more ignorance and the mullahs had more power. Some people used to tell their kids not to play with us. I remember that.

He is a young man, serious and well-educated in the way Bahá'ís usually are. His family is *haute bourgeoisie*, but the money has been heavily depleted by the exactions and losses incurred through years of public and private pressure. These are not the first troubled times the family has been through, and the young man's parents both knew poverty when they were young. But, again in the way of the

Bahá'ís, they started again, and his father obtained a government job which, as a result of hard work and intelligence, he did well. But he was continually passed over for promotion; the discrimination may not have been so savage under the Shah, but it was certainly there. In the end the father decided to give up and become a farmer.

> The first day in 1968 all you could see was stones and desert. The mountains were up there and the village was down there. But my father made a success of it. He was one of the few people who did make a success of farming there.
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> But by 1978 all you could see round about was other people's property. The boom had come, and people had made a lot of money in building. So they wanted to turn my father's farm into a residential area, because it was more profitable for the developers. They didn't like us being there anyway. We weren't welcome in the village, and sometimes they'd turn all the loudspeakers from the mosque in our direction.
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> Then the Revolution came, and the company that supplied us with our animals couldn't send them to us any more, because they'd all died. After that we had to try to import our animals, and that meant we needed permits. But the permits took a long time coming. That meant we weren't earning much money, and the bank wanted its loans back.
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> In the end they took the farm away from us, and all our furniture got stolen. All my father's clothes went, and all the things from my childhood: you know, toys and books. And that was how we lost our heritage.

The father's problems grew. He used to be stopped all the time in his car, and the Revolutionary Guards came to arrest him several times. He was unable to obtain a ration-book since they were distributed by the mullahs, and the family had to buy all its food at top prices on the black market. They moved to their house in Tehran; and in 1982 they decided they would have to leave the country altogether, since the farm had gone and they had no money except what they could get from selling their furniture and jewellery.

> The time when they just confiscated things or you could just pay money to keep out of gaol was over. Now they wanted people. Father went into hiding for two months, and he didn't contact my

mother the whole of that time – it was too dangerous. The plan was for her to get out to Pakistan, and then he would join her a week later.

Well, she made it. You could get out quite easily then to Pakistan through Baluchistan, if you paid money. They don't like Bahá'ís much in Pakistan now, because they're pretty strong Muslims too; but she got out all the same. It wasn't until she was safe that she found out my father had been arrested. There'd been a raid on the house, and they took him away. She wanted to go back, of course, but it would have been suicide. They'd have executed her for sure.

The father was charged with helping his wife to escape, with sending money out of the country, and with Zionism. The case dragged on for several years, and there was never any result. Now it has fallen into abeyance; but at any moment, if the authorities chose, he could be arrested again and brought to trial. He has no money of his own to live on, and for them to send him money from abroad would be too dangerous. Instead, he has to exist on the generosity of relatives. His wife and son talk to him occasionally on the telephone, they in their new life and he in the old. During those difficult, strained calls they never mention the case against him; and the only way they have of judging whether he is in any trouble is from his tone of voice.

There are many Bahá'ís in worse conditions: their pensions stopped, obliged to pay back enormous sums to the government, imprisoned, perhaps tortured. Those who have survived best are the people who work for themselves – taxi-drivers, small businessmen, craftsmen. The richer Bahá'ís help the poorer ones. They are not like the early Christians, rejoicing in martyrdom; but since they only have to make a simple statement to cease being Bahá'ís, and thereby cut their links with the most important part of their lives, the simple statement remains unmade.

It's difficult to understand, maybe, if you aren't a Bahá'í. It's a system of living. For us, working in a spirit of service isn't any different from praying. Being a Bahá'í is a progressive thing – kind of like going to school, except it never ends. It doesn't matter how many Bahá'ís are in gaol, or even killed, it'll carry on. And we certainly don't want to convert anybody. We just want to make them understand.

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On The Road

> But when he [the Persian muleteer] is fairly started he becomes a different man. With the dust of the city he shakes off the exasperating manner which has hitherto made him so objectionable. He sniffs the pure exhilarating air of the desert, he strides forward manfully on the broad interminable road (which is, indeed, for the most part but the track worn by countless generations of travellers), he beguiles the tediousness of the march with songs and stories, interrupted by occasional shouts of encouragement or warning to his animals. His life is a hard one, and he has to put up with many disagreeables; so that he might be pardoned even if he lost his temper oftener than he usually does.
>
> Edward Granville Browne,
> *A Year Amongst The Persians, 1893*

We had skirted round the southern edge of Qom, and had left behind us the well-constructed freeway which links the holy city with Tehran and enables the civil servants to consult the ayatollahs, and the ayatollahs to make the journey to the capital to check that their instructions are being carried out. South of Qom the road had reverted to its pre-Revolutionary self: a narrow ribbon of black tarmac, two lanes wide, across the dry yellow landscape. We were driving too fast, but that was something I had long grown used to; my first extensive experience of long-distance driving in Iran had been on this road in February 1979, a week or so before the Revolution took place, and Mahmoudi, then as now, was the driver.

He settled now behind a grey Paykan which contained at least seven human beings, and maybe more: two of the women on board may have had small children on their laps. In front of them was a line of four other cars. We were perhaps five yards behind the grey Paykan. I tried nervously to read Mahmoudi's speedometer, but it seemed to function irregularly, dropping back or surging forwards