

## **RESEARCH NOTE**

### ***A Note on Babi and Baha'i Numbers in Iran***

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It is not yet possible to say with any certainty what the total number of Babis may have been. According to the Bab himself, in a work written in the latter part of 1848, 100,000 adherents had been converted during the first four years of his career (MacEoin, 1982:117-18), a figure also referred to by the Russian Ambassador Dolgorukov in February 1849, by the Iranian chief minister, Amir Kabir (Dolgorukov, 1966:19), and by the British minister Sheil in May 1850 (Momen, 1981:7n). That this figure was very much a guess, at least where the two diplomats were concerned, is underlined by Sheil's reference to an alternative (but presumed to be less likely) figure of 50,000. Whatever the case, no detailed support for any figure can be supplied because of the semisecret nature of the Babi organization. Anyway, given that at least some Babis resorted to *taqiyya* (dissimulation), and that a wider circle of secret Babis and close sympathizers existed in addition to those who were definitely identified as Babis, who among these is included in the estimates? Again, Sheil is clear that he is referring to the number of Babi men, and we have simply no idea to what extent women and children were involved in the movement. If significant numbers were involved (and I think not) then the figure would, of course, have been higher.

As to the number of Baha'is, it is easiest to start with the most recent figures as they are likely to be the

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most reliable. Accordingly, the number of Baha'is in modern Iran has been variously estimated by Baha'i sources as about 400,000 (March 1979) or more commonly 300,000 (December 1981),<sup>1</sup> while informed non-Baha'i sources put the number at about 350,000 (September 1979),<sup>2</sup> or at 295,000 (mid-1975) to 340,000 (mid-1980) (Barrett, 1982:388). Although several thousand Baha'is have undoubtedly left Iran since the Islamic revolution of February 1979 and a small number have been forced to recant their faith, it seems highly unlikely that these together could account for the discrepancy of 100,000 between the March 1979 and December 1981 estimates. I therefore assume the March 1979 figure to be an overestimate and would assume that the number of registered Baha'is in modern Iran is in the region of 300,000-350,000, this figure including men, women, and children. These uncertainties doubtless stem from the difficulties encountered in enumerating an unrecognized/persecuted religious movement, making an accurate count problematic even for the movement's own leaders. Prior to the present century these difficulties were compounded by the comparative lack of organization within the Baha'i community and the conditions of extreme secrecy under which most Baha'is lived. Thus, J. D. Rees (1896), who traveled through Iran in 1885, was variously told there were no "Babis" at all in Iran, and that one-third of the educated classes were "Babis."<sup>3</sup> Baha'is, for their part, appear to have grossly overestimated their numbers (for whatever reason), and many European observers followed suit. Thus Baha'i sources informed the British consul in Bushire (c.1888) that they had a total Middle Eastern and Indian membership of 5 million (Momen, 1981:247), while Curzon (1892, i:499) estimated that there were at least half a million Iranian Baha'is and probably more like a million, and in 1903, Baha'i and diplomatic circles in Cairo were speculating on the possibility that Baha'ism would soon become the predominant religion in Iran (Phelps, 1904:X). Some later observers--some neutral, some antagonistic toward Baha'is--were, by contrast, likely to make what were apparently gross underestimates. Thus, Rosita Forbes (1931:168) doubted if there were more than 20,000 Iranian Baha'is, J. R. Richards (1932:225) placed their upper limit at 30,000, and W. M. Miller (1974:215) thought that by the time of 'Abdu'l Baha's death (1921) there would have been at most 50,000 Baha'is in the whole world. Similarly, Wilber (1967:165) has cited an (undated) official Iranian government estimate of 50,000 Baha'is. I

find none of these figures really credible, however, given the lack of any evidence for the wild fluctuations in the number of Baha'is which they presume. Compatible both with the assumption of relative stability in numbers and with the more definite 1979/81 figures are a series of estimates which placed the number of Baha'is in Iran at 100,000 in the 1880s (M. F. Wilson, 1885:829), and somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 in both the 1910s (S. G. Wilson, 1915: 26), and the 1950s (Berger, 1954:125), or more specifically, 192,000 in 1956 (Abrahamian, 1982:12). On this basis a coherent pattern may be suggested. Taking the estimated percentages for Babi/Baha'i numbers as a fraction of the Iranian population as a whole (Table 1), then at the peak of Babi activity they may be assumed to have won the allegiance of perhaps 2 percent of the population.

TABLE 1  
BABI AND BAHAI NUMBERS IN IRAN

Date	Estimated Iranian Babi/Baha'i population (in thousands)	Estimated Total Iranian population (in millions)	Babi/Baha'is as a percentage of total population
Late 1840s	100	4.5 - 6	1.7 - 2.2
1880s	100	5 - 8	1.25- 2.0
1910s	100 - 200	8 - 10	1.0 - 2.5
1950s	100 - 200	18.9 (1956)	0.5 - 1.1
1979	300 - 350	33.6 (1976)	0.9 - 1.0

Sources: For Babi and Baha'i figures see text. For the total Iranian population estimates see Abrahamian, 1974:14; Behnam, 1968:471; Bharier, 1972; Clark, 1972; Curzon, 1892, ii:471; Issawi, 1971:28. The figures for 1956 and 1976 are derived from the Iranian Census; all figures prior to 1956 are at best educated guesses.

After 1850, numbers may be assumed to have declined dramatically, stabilizing as the community became more ordered and then increasing quite markedly toward the end of the century. The increase might be explained by the dynamic nature of the Baha'i community at that time, and perhaps the general sense of social change, encouraging the Baha'is and others to be unrealistically optimistic as to their rate of growth. Thus, the very high estimates for the 1880s to 1910s, when in fact, the Baha'is appear only to have equaled the Babi percentage of 2 percent of the population, at best. This spurt of growth appears to have ceased in the 1920s or 1930s, outside observers referring to the lack of increase (Forbes, 1931) or even decline (Richards, 1932) in numbers. Although a decline in absolute numbers may not have occurred, the percentage of Baha'is in the general population seems thereafter to have declined, remaining at 1 percent or less through the 1950s to the present day. Whatever occasional success the Iranian Baha'is may have had in gaining new converts, it does not appear to have made an appreciable difference in their overall strength. Necessarily, the Iranian Baha'i community has come to rely on natural increase and the successful socialization of its children in order to maintain its existence. If--reflecting emerging middle-class norms--the Iranian Baha'is have a lower fertility rate than the Iranian average then this would contribute to their relative decline, but whether this is the case is unknown to me.<sup>4</sup> And while thousands of Iranian Baha'is have emigrated, this has never been a large-scale movement until recently and may thus be disregarded as a major demographic factor. The number of Azali Babis has always remained far smaller, Dr. Sa'eed Khan estimating their number to be 1,500 in 1930 and Jalal Azal putting them at between 4 and 5 thousand in 1963 (Miller, 1974: 114, n. 54; cf. Barrett, 1982:388; Keddie, 1981:52).

#### NOTES

This paper represents an amended version of section 7.1 of my Ph.D. thesis, "A Sociological Study of the Babi and Baha'i Religions" (Lancaster, 1982).

1. Press releases issued by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United Kingdom: "Iran and the British Baha'i Community," issued March 14, 1979; and

"Iran Secretly Executes Baha'i National Leaders," dated December 28, 1981. Press releases subsequent to December 1981 have all referred to a figure of 300,000.

2. *A Declaration on the State of Religious Minorities in Iran* by the Human Rights Commission of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Switzerland (Zurich), dated September 12, 1979.
3. Most of the Babis had become Baha'is by the late 1870s, but Iranian Muslims and most European travelers continued to call them "Babis."
4. Barrett (1982:388) estimates the Baha'i growth rate as 3.05 percent as compared with a national growth rate of 3.08 percent.

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