

Quiet Strangulation

Islamic Republic's treatment of Baha'is since 1991

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RESUMEN

Tras un repaso a la historia de la persecución de la comunidad bahá'í de Irán desde el inicio de la religión a mediados del siglo diecinueve, y un resumen de los análisis realizados por otros historiadores acerca de las raíces de la discriminación anti-bahá'í, este documento se centra en el trato que la República Islámica ha dispensado a los bahá'ís desde 1991, año en que un memorándum secreto sobre "la Cuestión Bahá'í" redefinió la política anterior del gobierno, que pasó de "abierta" supresión a una que en lo sucesivo sería "encubierta". El documento demuestra que el gobierno, después de haber aprendido de sus experiencias en la década de 1980, desde comienzos de la década de 1990 ha orquestado y seguido cuidadosamente planes para reprimir a la comunidad bahá'í en todas las facetas de la vida mediante métodos, cuyo propósito deliberado, ha consistido en generar la menor cantidad de indignación internacional y simpatía hacia los bahá'ís como sea posible. Este artículo sugiere que la raíz real, aunque oculta, del brutal trato que reciben los bahá'ís radica en la inseguridad y amenaza que siente el gobierno teocrático y su liderazgo clerical frente a la propagación del espíritu racional, de mirada abierta, global y altamente ético de la fe bahá'í.

Palabras claves: Irán; fe bahá'í; derechos humanos; libertad religiosa; Naciones Unidas.

RESUM:

Després fer un repàs a la història de la persecució de la comunitat bahà'í de l'Iran des de l'inici de la religió a mitjans del segle dinou, i un resum de les anàlisis realitzades per altres historiadors sobre les arrels de la discriminació anti-bahà'í, aquest document es centra en el tracte que la República Islàmica ha dispensat als bahà'ís des de 1991, any en què un memoràndum secret sobre "la Qüestió Bahà'í" va redefinir la política anterior del govern, que va passar de "oberta" supressió a una que en endavant seria "encoberta". El document demostra que el govern, després d'haver après de les seves experiències en la dècada de 1980, des de començaments de la dècada de 1990 ha orquestrat i seguit acuradament plans per reprimir a la comunitat bahà'í en totes les facetes de la vida mitjançant mètodes, el propòsit deliberat dels quals, ha consistit a generar la menor quantitat d'indignació internacional i simpatia cap als bahà'ís com sigui possible. Aquest article suggereix que l'arrel real, encara que oculta, del brutal tracte que reben els bahà'ís radica en la inseguretat i amenaça que sent el govern teocràtic i el seu lideratge clerical enfront de la propagació de l'esperit racional, de mirada oberta, global i altament ètic de la fe bahà'í.

Paraules claus: Iran; fe bahà'í; drets humans; llibertat religiosa; Nacions Unides.

ABSTRACT

This article first provides a survey of the history of the persecution of the Baha'i community of Iran since the inception of the religion in the mid-nineteen century, and a summary of the analyses of other historians on the roots of anti-Baha'i discrimination. It then focuses on the Islamic Republic's treatment of Baha'is since 1991, the year a secret memorandum regarding "the Baha'i Question" redefined the government's previous policy of "overt" suppression to one that would be henceforth "covert." It demonstrates that the government, having learned from its experiences in the 1980s, has, since the early 1990s, carefully orchestrated and pursued plans to suppress the Baha'i community in all areas of life, in ways that have deliberately sought to generate the least amount of international outrage and sympathy as possible. It proposes that the real yet hidden root of the brutal treatment of Baha'is is the insecurity and threat the theocratic government and its clerical leadership feel about the spread of the rational, outward-looking, world-embracing and highly ethical ethos of the Baha'i Faith.

Keywords: Iran; Bahá'í faith; human rights; religious freedom; United Nations.

Introduction

"The government's dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked."

"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."

"A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country."

The above statements are extracted from a confidential memorandum issued by the highest levels of authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran, *not* in relation to the people of a country at war with Iran, but about part of the country's own nation –the Baha'i community. The confidential memorandum dated 25 February 1991¹ was approved by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and written by Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, then secretary of Iran's Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution. It was disclosed in 1993 by Reynaldo Galindo Pohl (d. 2012), the Salvadoran jurist who was at the time serving as the U.N. Human Rights Commission's special representative on Iran.² Addressing "the Baha'i question," the memorandum expatiated upon the policy of the Islamic Republic to –using the words of the international governing body of the Baha'i community–

¹ Corresponding to 6 Isfand 1369, in Iranian calendar

² Baha'i International Community [2008, September]: p. 21; Ahmari, S. (2012, May 13)

“eradicate the Baha’i community as a viable entity.”³ The memorandum disclosed the plan of the Iranian government to push Baha’is to convert to Islam, by closing doors of economic and social progress on them, so that they may become an uneducated and poor community.⁴ In the words of the Baha’i International Community (BIC), the international non-governmental organization (NGO) representing the members of the Baha’i Faith, the 1991 memorandum “clearly seeks to shift tactics from overt persecution, such as killing, torture and imprisonment, to the kind of covert social, economic, and cultural restrictions that would be thought less likely to bring intense international scrutiny and condemnation.”⁵

While obviously the persecution the Baha’is of Iran and discrimination against them did not begin with this memorandum and have not even been limited to the time after the Shi’i theocracy following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, complying with the scope of *Tiempo Devorado*, this article focuses on the most salient features of the persecution of the Baha’is of Iran in the past 30 years, since the issuance of this memorandum. Twenty-five years after the BIC’s reference to the “shift in tactics” that the 1991 memorandum represents, this paper aims to demonstrate not only the general shift away from official executions, but also a shift in tactics from overt to covert measures in all other areas of persecution and discrimination, particularly education and economic, so that the government fulfils its plan to block the development of the Baha’i community, with increasing intensity, and *without* having to worry about international repercussions.

Furthermore, based on evidence gathered about the various ways in which the government aims to alienate the general population from their Baha’i compatriots, this article suggests that the main reason behind the continuous and fierce persecutions of Baha’is is the Islamic Republic’s fear of the propagation of the Baha’i teachings—insofar as it considers the Baha’i teachings a threat to its homogenizing tendencies which advocate for a politicized Shi’ism. In other words, suppression comes from a silent albeit unacknowledged awareness that if this rival religion be allowed to present itself, it might win the hearts of many among the nation.

Before proceeding any further, a short introduction to who the Baha’is are and a discussion of the causes of the persecution of Baha’is are in order.

³ The Universal House of Justice (2011, June 17)

⁴ See the full text of the English translation of the memorandum on the opposite page. For the original Persian see:

http://dl.bahai.org/bwns/assets/documentlibrary/575/5_TheISRCCdocument.pdf (accessed July 12, 2018)

⁵ Baha’i International Community (1993, June); Baha’i International Community (2005): p. 9

Who Are the Baha'is?

Baha'is are the followers of Mirza Husayn 'Ali, known as Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), whom they believe,⁶ together with his forerunner Sayyid Ali Muhammad, known as the Bab (1819-1850), inaugurated a new dispensation in world religions.⁷ Baha'is believe the world needs a spiritual rejuvenation every one thousand or so years through the appearance of a Manifestation of God, whose coming heralds a fundamental change in the world. The teachings of each Manifestation of God are in accordance with the ever-changing level of understanding of the people of his time. Ontologically, the Manifestations of God are all one and the same; Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad the Bab, and Baha'u'llah are all recognized as Manifestations of the same higher spiritual reality, and this spiritual reality intermediates between God and humankind. Oneness of God, Oneness of the Manifestations of God (hence, oneness of the core of their religions), and oneness of humankind form three of the fundamental principles of the Baha'i religion. The oneness of humankind is the pivot round which all other teachings of the Baha'i religion revolve. The realization of this essential oneness and creating consciousness about it are the goals of the Baha'i religion. Its social teachings include the equality of men and women, the eradication of all prejudices, and the elimination of extreme poverty and wealth. There are no clerics in the Baha'i religion, and the affairs of the community are run by the elected bodies at local, national and international levels. The world population of Baha'is is estimated to be around five million,⁸ approximately 300,000 of whom live in Iran.

Historians on the Causes of the Persecution of the Baha'is in Iran

Even though the history of anti-Baha'ism in Iran in all its aspects is yet to be studied academically, in recent decades, historians of Iran have made some valuable contributions. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi from the University of Toronto has shed light on the link between Islamism and anti-Baha'ism,⁹ and Yale historian Abbas Amanat has investigated the roots of anti-Baha'ism in Iran.¹⁰ Dismissing

⁶ For more on the Baha'i religion, see Smith, P. (2008); Momen, M. (1999); Hatcher, W. S. & Martin, D. (1985)

⁷ The followers of the Bab who was executed in 1850 were known as Babis. For an academic study of the Bab and his early followers, see Amanat (1989). The majority, more than 90%, of Babis became Baha'is, i.e., the followers of Baha'u'llah

⁸ Estimates range from five to seven million. See *Encyclopedia Britannica*

⁹ Tavakoli-Targhi, M. (2008)

¹⁰ Amanat, A. (2008)

theories of class conflict as inadequate for explaining the pattern of anti-Baha'i violence, Amanat interprets their persecutions as a "socio- cultural phenomenon." The Baha'is, he argues, "were a sore point of non-conformity within a society seeking monolithic unanimity in the face of overwhelming threats from within and outside of its boundaries; a society fearful of losing its perceived 'uniqueness' as the Shi'i 'saved sect'." The anti-Baha'i sentiments were, in Amanat's analysis, "a doctrinally admissible ritual to forge a sense of collective 'self' versus an indigenous 'other' at a time when the alien 'other' was too intimidating and inaccessible to be viewed as an adversary." The rejection of "the indigenous modernity of the Babi-Baha'i world view" was the corollary to "Shi'i particularism," a term he uses to refer to the sense of "exclusive self" that Iranian Shi'ism aims to construct "out of the fragile complex of the existing religious and social identities."¹¹

Harvard historian Roy Mottahedeh has also developed a general theory explaining the treatment of Baha'is under different regimes before the Islamic Republic. Situating the conditions of Baha'is in the interplay between the clerics and the state in modern Iranian history, Mottahedeh suggests that in Iran,

the Baha'is throughout most of their history were a pawn that...governments played in their complex game with the mullahs...[N]one of the governments was willing to surrender this pawn in a single move ...Tolerating Baha'is was a way of showing mullahs who was boss. Correspondingly, allowing active persecution of the Baha'is was the low-cost pawn that could be sacrificed to the mullahs when the government was in trouble or in special need of mulla support.¹²

Houchang Chehabi, professor of International Relations and History at Boston University, in investigating the roots of secular anti-Baha'ism in Iran, proposes that Baha'i cosmopolitanism deeply rooted in the tenets of their religion causes anti-Baha'i prejudices in many secular Iranians, mostly nationalists with xenophobic tendencies.¹³ Reza Afshari, Professor of History and Human Rights at Pace University, focuses on anti-Baha'ism under the Islamic Republic. Proposing that political considerations and state expediencies alone do not fully explain the anti-Baha'i policies and actions in the Islamic Republic of Iran, as Baha'is did not present a challenge to the consolidation of the Islamic regime, Afshari suggests that such actions originated "in the clerics' aversions, whose roots lay in a pre-

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Mottahedeh, R. (2008): pp. 238-239

¹³ Chehabi, H. E. (2008)

modern religious prejudice” and “their dislike of a home-grown religious faith.”¹⁴ He demonstrates that in post-revolutionary Iran, whenever the political factions have vied with one another for power, the persecution of Baha’is has increased.

Causes of the Persecution from this Author’s Point of View

Why the persecution? The short answer to this question is that most Shi’i clerics in Iran consider the Baha’i religion heretical and feel threatened by it. Mainstream Islamic reading of a verse from the Qur’an (33:40)¹⁵ makes Muslims believe the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood. Therefore, the majority of Muslim clerics consider a religion appearing after Islam a mere heresy which must be uprooted. Most of them also feel threatened by it because it attracted a large following early in the nineteenth century, and its social teachings and fundamental tenets, such as the oneness of humankind, oneness of all religions, eradication of all forms of prejudice, and the equality of men and women, make it attractive to many today. Its lack of an ecclesiastical order and rejection of clerics as an unnecessary category is particularly unsettling to the Shi’i clerics, and can be, given the bitter experience with the rule of clerics in the past forty years in Iran, a source of attraction in itself. From this author’s point of view, at the heart of the suppression and persecution of the Baha’is of Iran lies this covert feeling of insecurity on the part of clerics who have enjoyed social influence and political power at the local and central level for most of Iran’s history in the last one hundred and seventy years. The suppression is, in reality, the suppression of a worldview presented by a new religion, which, if allowed to have a public voice and presence, it is very likely to gain many supporters thanks to its universalistic and progressive teachings and its strong resonance with some of the most luminous trends in Iranian religious, mystical and philosophical traditions—trends that are particularly appealing to many Iranians.

An Overview of the History of the Persecution of Baha’is in Iran

The Qajar Period

With the spread of the Baha’i religion in Iran since its tumultuous birth in that country in the middle part of the nineteenth century, the persecution of its followers has been a part of Iranian history. As historian Amanat indicates, during the Qajar period (1785-1925), anti-Babi pogroms and campaigns usually occurred

¹⁴ Afshari, R. (2008)

¹⁵ The verse has been translated as, “Muhammad is not the father of any man among you; rather, he is the Messenger of God and the Seal of Prophets. And God is knower of all things.” See Nasr, S. Husayn, et al. (Eds.) (2015)

during provincial or national crises such as those caused by harvest failures, famines, and epidemics. The Babis (and later Baha'is) served as scapegoats to cover the state's failure in relation to European economic and political intrusion. Drawing the attention of the public to the evils of this so-called devious sect served to consolidate relations between the Qajar government and the clergy.

Near the end of the Qajar rule, during the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911), Iran's first constitution was drawn. The existence of Baha'is as a religious minority was not acknowledged in the constitution. It restricted the recognized religious minorities to the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. It can be said that, by excluding them from the constitution, the discrimination against Baha'is was institutionalized along with the introduction of law to Iran.¹⁶ With the beginning of the rule of law in Iran, discriminatory legislation against Baha'is also began.

The Pahlavi Period

With the demise of the Qajars and the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-1941) to power, physical assaults, including murder, against Baha'is considerably decreased but did not cease. The last mob attack on Baha'is during this period occurred in 1926, when angry groups killed somewhere between eight to twelve Baha'is in Jahrum, a small city in the Fars province. The attacks were apparently instigated by a representative of parliament who sought to gain favor with anti-Baha'i religious leaders in order to secure re-election. The Baha'is complained to the local and national authorities to no avail.¹⁷ Although Baha'is enjoyed reprieve from physical attacks during the rest of Reza Shah's iron-fist rule,¹⁸ they were deprived of certain social rights in the closing years of his reign when the government forbade Baha'i meetings, closed Baha'i centers and Baha'i schools, and harassed Baha'is on matters concerning census forms, marriage certificates, and birth certificates. The government also dismissed some Baha'i government employees and stripped several Baha'is serving in the army of their ranks.¹⁹ The motivation behind such harsh measures might lie in Reza Shah's determination "to subordinate all other loyalties to allegiance to his person,"²⁰ or perhaps in his intention to avoid unnecessary friction with the Shi'i clerics, that is, friction beyond what was inevitable for the implementation of what were called his modernizing ideas.

¹⁶ On this topic, see Chehabi, H. E. (2013, May 15)

¹⁷ Yazdani, M. (2011)

¹⁸ For Reza Shah's rule, see Abrahamian, E. (1982): pp.102-165

¹⁹ Yazdani, M. (2011)

²⁰ Martin, D. (1984): p.20

With Reza Shah's forced abdication and Mohammad Reza Shah's accession to the throne in 1941, the influence of the Shi'i clerics resurged, and a new era commenced. The situation of Baha'is during Mohammad Reza Shah's reign (1941-1979) went through different phases, despite the official narrative of the current Islamic regime, which depicts this period as one of bliss and prosperity because of Baha'i "collaboration" with the Shah's regime. To make a long story short, while the Shah himself did not have an anti-Baha'i stance, his treatment of Baha'is was the net result of his intricate relations with the Shi'i clerics on the one hand, and his concern with creating a favorable international image regarding human rights on the other. From 1941 through 1955, during the periods of socio-political crises, Baha'is were initially scapegoated in the interactions among the government, the clerics, and the people, and went through several bloody incidents, the culmination of which was the 1955 anti-Baha'i campaign.²¹ During this campaign, the government of the Shah initially gave the Shi'i clerics free reign to persecute the Baha'is, but later, fearing further deterioration of its reputation and human rights record, attempted to inhibit further attacks by clerics on Baha'is, and refused to accept their official request to purge Iran of all Baha'is.²² From the late 1950s to the last years of the Shah's reign, Baha'is enjoyed relative security, even if they were officially non-existent in the country.²³

In the latter half of the turbulent year of 1978, the Shah's regime destabilized, and religiously motivated physical threats and mob attacks on Baha'is—which had ceased for about two decades—resurfaced in different parts of Iran, particularly in some rural areas where Baha'is were expelled from their villages.²⁴ In 1978, seven Baha'is were killed in different parts of Iran, mostly as a result of mob violence.²⁵ Such events, which continued for months after the February 1979 victory of the Islamic Revolution, were alarming signals to Baha'is of difficult times ahead.

Persecution of Baha'is Under the Islamic Republic

a) *The First Decade (1979-1989)*

²¹ Yazdani, M. (2017)

²² Tavakoli-Targhi asserts that the occasion was at the same time the apogee of the collaboration between the Shah's regime and the Shi'i clerics, and the point of separation between them. Tavakoli-Targhi, M. (2008)

²³ Fischer, M. J. (1980); Yazdani, M. (2017)

²⁴ Fischer, M. J (1980); *The Baha'i World: An International Record* (1986)

²⁵ Baha'i International Community (2008, September). An earlier source had recorded that ten Baha'is were killed in 1978. See *The Baha'i World: An International Record* (1986): p. 291

The leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (d.1989), let it be known from the beginning that Baha'is were not tolerated in his regime.²⁶ With the victory of the Revolution in February 1979, a new constitution was drawn. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic, as professor of International Relations and History at Boston University Chehabi put it, "is honest enough *not* to pretend that it does not discriminate on the basis of religion, because Article 19 grants all Iranian citizens equal rights whatever their ethnic group, tribe, color, race, and language, but not whatever their religion." Chehabi further clarified that the 1979 constitution emphasizes that Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians were "*the only*" recognized minorities, and added, "Unsurprisingly the adherents of the Baha'i faith received no recognition."²⁷ Accordingly, the Islamic Penal Code developed in the Islamic Republic provided grounds for overt discrimination against Baha'is.²⁸

In the first three years of the Islamic Republic, one hundred Baha'is were executed by the government purely due to their belief.²⁹ Many more were arrested and jailed with long sentences, and community properties were confiscated. All Baha'i government employees were dismissed from their jobs, and Baha'i students were expelled from universities. In some cases, for a limited period of time, Baha'i children and youth were dismissed from elementary, middle and high schools.³⁰

In 1983, the government officially outlawed all the institutions of the Baha'i Administrative Order, basically composed of nine member bodies called Assemblies which were annually elected by the vote of the believers at the local and national levels.³¹ In obedience to the law of the government, as the Baha'i teachings dictate, the Baha'i community closed all the local Spiritual Assemblies functioning at the level of the localities and cities, and the National Spiritual Assembly. In the remaining years of the first decade of the Islamic republic the same pattern of persecution and discrimination continued.

By the end of 1989, in total, 204 Baha'is had lost their lives since the inception of the Islamic Republic. Most of them had received death sentences and were executed by the government. The rest disappeared or were kidnapped and were pre-

²⁶ Yazdani, M. (2012)

²⁷ Chehabi, H. E. (2013, May 15)

²⁸ See Milani, S. (2016, Spring/Summer]

²⁹ Baha'i International Community (2008, September)

³⁰ The author has witnessed such events while living in Shiraz, Iran at the time

³¹ On the Baha'i Administrative Order, see Smith, P. (2000): pp. 24-28; Hatcher, W. S. & Martin, D. (1985): pp. 143-165

sumed dead, died in prison, were mobbed, or killed otherwise.³² Most of those who lost their lives were the members of the elected bodies at local and national levels or otherwise active Baha'is whom the government believed were the source of strength for the Baha'i community and in whose absence the community would wither and perish.

The sheer number of lost lives and other violations of human rights, persecutions, and discriminations against Baha'is had immense repercussions at the international level. Between 1980 and 1989, the Commission on Human Rights, and the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities issued ten resolutions expressing grave concern for the Baha'is of Iran. Furthermore, in 1986, the Chairman of the Commission appointed Reynaldo Calindo Pohl as the special representative to monitor and report on grave human rights concerns in Iran.³³ Additionally, the international news media, foreign governments and human rights organizations drew attention to the plight of the Baha'is of Iran (BIC, 2016, p. 65).³⁴ It was, most probably, a result of all the international pressure that since the early 1990s a shift occurred in the government's treatment of Baha'is—a shift that left the memory of the first decade of the Islamic Republic as the bloodiest thus far, and a decade that not-incidentally coincided with the reign of Khomeini as the Supreme Leader.

We can now turn to the last thirty years which, in compliance with the time period covered by *Tiempo Devorado*, are the focus of this paper.

b) 1990-

While between 1979 and 1991, the year the memorandum was issued, more than 150 Baha'is were officially sentenced to death by Iran's judiciary system and executed³⁵, after 1991, only two such official executions took place, one in 1992 in Tehran and the other (the last one so far) in 1998 in Isfahan (BIC 2008c, Appendix I). This noticeable decrease in the number of executions is the most significant development that took place after governmental deliberations led to the production of the 1991 memorandum.³⁶ The memorandum neither called for the execu-

³² Baha'i International Community (2008, September)

³³ For more on UN activities regarding the persecution of the Baha'is of Iran, see Ghanea, N. (2003)

³⁴ Baha'i International Community (2016, October)

³⁵ This number, obviously, does not include the more than 40 people who were killed, died in prison, or were presumed dead because they disappeared or were kidnapped, during this period. See Baha'i International Community (2008, September)

³⁶ Baha'i International Community (2008, September). For the background to those deliberations, see Zabihi-moghaddan, S. (2016): p. 133

tions to end nor to be abated, but, as far as the treatment of Baha'is was concerned, that was the major perceived change. The other noticeable and related change was a considerable but short-lived decrease in the number of arrests and imprisonments during the 1990s and early 2000s. Everything else mentioned in the memorandum reaffirmed policies endorsed by the Islamic Republic since its inception, now to be continued in a steadier and more corrosive manner in a unilateral war of attrition. In the words of historian Zabihi-Moghaddam, "the brutal and partly chaotic" treatment of Baha'is was now changed to "an institutionalized process with well-defined policies."³⁷ In the pages that follow, I will review the major features of these policies.

Educational Deprivation

Deprivation of Baha'is from higher education in Iran under the Islamic Republic started when the universities began to open after their long term closure during the "Cultural Revolution" which started in April 1980. Some universities and colleges took as long as three years to reopen, while others, like the Faculty of Medicine in Shiraz, reopened after a year and a half. Once the universities reopened, all returning students had to re-register. Nearly one thousand Baha'i university students throughout Iran were denied re-entry and barred from finishing their higher education. For more than twenty years following the dismissal of all Baha'i students from universities, Baha'is high school graduates were not permitted to take part in the nation-wide university entrance exam. The application form had a question on religion, where applicants had to choose one of the four officially recognized religions of the country: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. Since Baha'is did not identify themselves with any of the four, they would not choose any of the options, the majority rather adding a note in the explanations section that they were Baha'is. As a result, they would not be sent the card needed to enter the examination hall. The international repercussions of the Iranian government's prohibiting Baha'i students from entering universities—with governments, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations and individuals raising questions about this situation—finally led the authorities, beginning in 2004, to devise strategies that would generally keep Baha'i students out of universities, while pretending to the world that Baha'is were not being discriminated against. It must be explained here that the university admission process has three major stages: 1) applying for the nation-wide entrance exam; 2) applying for specific universities based on the result of the exam, the transcript of which they have received; and 3) enrolling in the particular program providing admittance. Over the years, various ploys have been put into place to exclude Baha'is at each of these stages, and even after the actual enrollment during their

³⁷ Zabihi-moghaddam, S. (2016): p. 124

studies. Since 2004, a portion of the Baha'i students have been allowed to take the entrance exam, a small percentage of those applying for the universities have been admitted, while the majority have been rejected under the premise that their files are incomplete. Of the small number of students who have been accepted, the majority has been expelled at some point in their studies—whether in the first semester or the last—according to the guidelines of the 1991 memorandum. Students usually discover that they have been dismissed when they attempt to log into their accounts at the university and find a message stating that their account has been blocked due to a security problem and will be referred to the security office for further legal steps. It is only when students follow up that they are orally told that they have been dismissed because they are Baha'is. In some cases, students have been told that they will not be given a document specifying the cause of their dismissal because such a document “would be used in Zionist circles” against the government.³⁸ In rare cases where a written letter is provided, the cause of dismissal is intentionally left in vague, non-specific terms such as lacking the “general qualifications” required,³⁹ or even just “due to some reasons,”⁴⁰ or due to “legal obstacles.”⁴¹ Only a handful have been allowed to graduate. Whenever the Baha'i International Community's representative to the United Nations have brought up the information regarding the deprivation of Baha'i students from higher education, Iranian authorities have dismissed the information as baseless. In one such case in 2007, the spokesman for Iran's mission to the United Nations has asserted, “No one in Iran has been expelled from studying because of their religion” (Nicholas, 2007). An even more blatant claim unraveled the instrumental use of allowing occasional Baha'i students to be present in universities in Iran. Following the press release issued in late March 2006 by Ms. Asma Jahangir (d. 2018), the United Nations Commission on Human Rights' Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, about the government's call for the Baha'is in Iran to be secretly monitored,⁴² Iranian diplomats responded by

³⁸ Information obtained from individuals who have gone through the process and are currently living in Iran. Their identities have been kept confidential for their safety

³⁹ See, for example, the letter informing Delaram Sadeqzadeh, the distinguished student of the Master's program in Educational Psychology of Shahid Beheshti University, dated 28 April 2015, informing her of her dismissal, available at <http://www.radiozamaneh.com/249985> [accessed 5 Jan., 2016]

⁴⁰ An example is the letter dated 22 September 2010, written by Mohammad Mohsen Taghvi, the Director of Education of the Medical Sciences University of Rafsanjan to Ja'fari Naveh, the deputy education administrator of the university's Medical School, regarding the expulsion of the recently admitted medical student Rouhollah Ghudrat. A soft copy of the letter is in possession of this author

⁴¹ See a letter regarding the dismissal of an English Language student in May 2007, from the University of Gilan, can be retrieved from <http://aasoo.org/documents/19/> [accessed 5 Jan., 2016]

⁴² Baha'i International Community (2006, August 19)

claiming Baha'is not being prevented from higher education as a testimony to their not being persecuted.

Given the importance of education for Baha'is, in 1987, the dismissed university professors resolved to establish an intra-community network of learning, which, even though not recognized by the government, could provide the youth with both motivation and opportunity for education. Over time, this institute for higher education, although not recognized inside the country, managed to educate graduates that could enter universities outside Iran to continue their studies. This success caused the government to crack down on Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education BIHE, confiscating its instructional tools and arresting its faculty and staff. Tolerating long prison sentences, those running BIHE did not succumb to the government's absurd wish to close this main venue of higher education for its youth.⁴³

Economic Pressure

Over the years, the government's economic restrictions on Baha'is has steadily increased. Based on what seems to be an organized systematic long-term plan the government has tried its best to limit the economic activity of Baha'is at such levels as to only permit them at most "a modest livelihood," as indicated in the guidelines of the Feb. 1991 memorandum.

Immediately after the Revolution, the government destroyed all Baha'i holy places and confiscated their communal funds and communal buildings throughout the country. The confiscated properties included local meeting halls, administrative offices, and cemeteries. In addition, it also confiscated large Baha'i-owned businesses, threatened the lives of the owners of these businesses and forced them to flee the country. As early as 1980, the government began expelling Baha'is from public employment and disallowed hiring of any Baha'is in the public sector. Within a couple of years, it had expelled all Baha'i employees except the few who succumbed to the pressure to recant their religion. Baha'i peasant farmers were not spared either: they were denied access to the government-sponsored farmers' co-operatives which were their only source of credit, seed, pesticide and fertilizer. Expelled from the public sector, many Baha'is began to establish their own businesses. However, the private sector did not provide any immunity. Baha'is who owned small businesses became targets of boycotts or-

⁴³ Yazdani, M. (2015)

ganized by religious leaders, damage and looting, and forced closures and confiscation.⁴⁴

Many Baha'is tried to earn a living by finding jobs in private companies owned by Muslims. But during the presidency of Akbar Hashimi Rafsanjani (r. 1989-1997, d. 2017), in the post Iran-Iraq war Construction Era, the Ministry of Islamic Guidance interrogated many businesses and companies about their workforce and compelled those who had Baha'i workers to dismiss them. The liberalizing trends of the next president, Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005) did not result in any significant changes to the economic life of the Baha'i community. With the coming to power of the hardline president Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), economic pressures on Baha'is further intensified. An official letter from the Headquarters of the Intelligence and National Security Force dated 9 April 2007 instructed all police forces in Iran to identify all Baha'i-owned businesses in their area and to close down those "in the categories of culture, advertising and commerce," those "connected with food where the Baha'is might contaminate the food of Muslims," and "all businesses where the Baha'i owner is successful and the business is highly profitable."⁴⁵

As a result, a large number of Baha'i businesses in all parts of the country were forced to close either through refusal of licenses, withholding of supplies, boycotts or eviction from premises.⁴⁶ The same policies have continued over the last five years, during the presidency of Hasan Rouhani (2013-current). It can be argued that the economic pressures on Baha'is have increased in the past 5 years becoming more pervasive, thereby ensuring the implementation of the government's policy to block the "progress and development" of Baha'is making possible only a "modest livelihood", well in line with the government's guidelines of the 1991 Memorandum

In fact, based on what has transpired in more recent years, in terms of imposing obstacles in the way of renewing business licenses (BIC, 2016, pp. 28-29), the economic limitations imposed on Baha'is exceeded the provisions of the 1991 Memorandum which allowed issuing "work permits" for Baha'is. In many cases the application for renewal is halted in the very last stage which has to do with the public Places Supervision Office (*Amakin*), which is a subdivision of the Ministry of Intelligence. In effect, the applicant works on a temporary permit and in

⁴⁴ Momen, M. (2009)

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

such a situation the business can be closed at any moment.⁴⁷ Covert tactics such as imposing bureaucratic obstacles in the renewal of business licenses seem to best fit the Iranian government's plan: strangulating the Baha'i community without attracting international attention.

There have also been cases in which Baha'is whose private businesses had prospered have been arrested and put on trial with the accusation of "membership in unlawful groups"—another way of saying that someone is a Baha'i. They have then been sentenced to five years imprisonment and their businesses closed.⁴⁸ The net effect of such imprisonments is the withering of the businesses those people owned, hence cutting the livelihood of not only their own families but also that of several others who relied on those businesses as their sources of income. Under the condition of collective financial hardship, any Baha'i who owns a successful business even when small tries to engage as many others as possible. The government seems to believe that the financial hardship will ultimately lead Baha'is to convert to Islam or leave the country, and above all it hopes a community forced to be so much concerned with its daily subsistence will be in no position to attract anyone to its beliefs.

Lack of Physical Safety: Murders, Acts of Violence, Arrests

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Regrettably, the fact that no Baha'i has been officially executed in Iran since 1998 does not mean that Baha'is have been protected by the government. Hate crimes against Iranian Baha'is continue to be tolerated by the authorities. In 2005, a Baha'i who was in prison in Yazd solely because of his beliefs died for unknown reasons. Two months before his death, during his trial, a judge had told him: "Even if you are released from prison, we will get rid of you in a [car] accident."⁴⁹ At least nine Baha'is were murdered or died under suspicious circumstances between 2005 and 2013.⁵⁰ The perpetrators were not investigated or prosecuted. On August 24, 2013, Ataollah Rezvani, 54, was murdered in southern Iran. A water purification expert, he "was well-known as a Baha'i and was loved and respected by the people of Bandar Abbas for his honesty and helpfulness." (Baha'i World News Service, 2013). He was dismissed from his work due to pressure and threats from agents of the Ministry of Intelligence who had told him to leave the city. Following a number of threatening phone calls from unknown people, he was found dead, shot in the head. Prior to his killing, some senior clerics in town

⁴⁷ The sources for this information and the relevant documents must remain confidential because of the obvious dangers their publication will pose to the individuals involved

⁴⁸ Again, the source of the data and the pertaining documents are kept confidential for safety reasons

⁴⁹ Baha'i International Community (2013, March)

⁵⁰ Ibid.

had attempted to incite people against Baha'is. The government never prosecuted or arrested anyone for Rezvani's murder.⁵¹

In the next case, the murderers were actually chased by people and handed in to the police only to be released: On September 26, 2016, in Yazd, Farhang Amiri, 63, was stabbed to death by two strangers who had come to the door of his house. On their trial the two brother murderers said, very openly, that they killed Amiri because he was a Baha'i and that they had heard from a cleric that Baha'is were apostates the shedding of whose blood was a meritorious act. They even told the interrogators that they would kill another Baha'i upon their release. Both men were released on bail. The judge indicated that according to Iranian law, the sentence the brothers receive would be "very light."⁵² The judge's reference to "Iranian law" pertains to the provisions of Islamic Penal Code according to which, if an "apostate" is murdered, the only punishment that the murderer might face is a prison sentence from three to ten years.⁵³ That there are such provisions in the Islamic Penal Code does not mean that Iranian authorities are comfortable with the news of the killing of Baha'is leaking out. In at least one case of murder, on Dec. 30, 2014, the authorities so vehemently forbade the family of the victim from following up the case and speaking publicly about it that the family remained completely silent. As a result, even the official reports from Baha'i organizations outside Iran lack any references to her case, probably to safeguard the family. Immediately following the incident, before being quieted by the Iranian authorities, the family had revealed that the victim, Leila Kargar, 42, had told her family before her death that a couple of hours earlier, while in a park, she had talked about the Baha'i teachings to a woman "who seemed friendly," and who afterwards offered her some fruit juice. Having received her at home feeling extremely weak and in poor condition, the family took her to the ER, where she died, according to the attending physicians, due to Aluminium Phosphide ("rice tablet") poisoning.⁵⁴ Kargar's murder bears striking similarity, in terms of the circumstances in which it occurred, to the case of an eighty-two-year old man, in Feb. 2009 in Yazd, whose disappearance, according to the government agencies, "was related to his efforts to talk about the Baha'i Faith, which aroused the enmity of his neighbors."⁵⁵

In addition to these murders with impunity, there have been other forms of violence directed against Baha'is: death threats, physical assaults on individuals,

⁵¹ Baha'i International Community (2016, October)

⁵² Baha'i World News Service. (2016, Oct. 26); Baha'i International Community (2017, June 13)

⁵³ Milani, S. (2016, Spring/Summer): pp. 140-41

⁵⁴ Sabeti, K. (2015, January 11)

⁵⁵ Baha'i International Community (2016, October)

arson and attacks on Baha'i owned properties, abuses of schoolchildren, and attacks on Baha'i cemeteries.⁵⁶ The Baha'i International Community has documented more than sixty-eight physical assaults on Baha'is all over Iran. The attackers have never been prosecuted. The Iranian authorities, in their public statements, depict such attacks as "a manifestation of popular prejudice beyond government control." However, the Baha'i International Community, having investigated each case, asserted that "most acts of violence against Baha'is and their properties are undertaken with likely government complicity."⁵⁷

For approximately fifteen years, from the early 1990s to 2005, few Baha'is were arrested due to their religious beliefs. Yet the period since 2005 has witnessed a return to the 1980s pattern of arrests, detentions and imprisonments. Between 2005 and 2016 at least 860 Baha'is were arrested, and 275 served time in prison. An additional 147 Baha'is were taken into custody between 2016 and March 2018, showing that arrests have continued unabatedly.⁵⁸ In 2008, the seven members of the *ad hoc* committee overseeing the affairs of the Baha'is of Iran were imprisoned. Each received a twenty-year sentence, which was later reduced to ten years. Six out of the seven were released following the termination of their sentence. Hundreds of others have been incarcerated for varying durations, the allegations usually being security-related charges, with endangering the "security of the country" meaning virtually whatever the government wants it to mean.

In reality, these arrests and imprisonments are invariably due to believing in the Baha'i Faith and participating in activities such as "study groups or youth programs designed to assist individuals to serve their communities and work for the betterment of society," and those arrested had been "willing to speak about their beliefs."⁵⁹ A number of Baha'is who have been arrested, interrogated and imprisoned in recent years in Iran have revealed to this author that the red line for the regime seems to be Baha'is telling their Muslim neighbors, friends and acquaintances about the Baha'i teachings. Even sharing a Baha'i-inspired point of view on a certain topic that is brought up on a taxi or the bus is cause for concern to the regime. The level of sensitivity against the spread of Baha'i ideas can be inferred from the statement of a judge who was in charge of the trial of a number of Baha'is. When offered to examine some Baha'i books as evidence of the inno-

⁵⁶ Baha'i International Community (2013, March): pp.10-27; Baha'i International Community (2016, October): pp.37-47

⁵⁷ Baha'i International Community (2016, October): p. 38

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 17

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17

cent nature of the Baha'i teaching, he refused to do so because he "was fearful of being led astray."⁶⁰

Distancing other Iranians from Baha'is: How and Why?

As demonstrated above, the government of the Islamic Republic clearly intends to block the progress and development of the Baha'i community economically, educationally and otherwise. But there are signs indicating that preventing development and progress of Baha'is is not the only intention. There is also a major project to distance other Iranians from Baha'is. Some of the features of government's program to isolate Baha'is from their fellow citizens are as follows:

The most outright and undisguised feature of the distancing project is the official fatwas (authoritative, advisory legal opinions) given by the high-ranking clerics about Baha'is being ritually impure (*najis*) with whom Muslims must avoid interactions. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei has issued the following *fatwa* on his official website:⁶¹

All members of the perverse Bahaist sect are condemned as blasphemous and ritually unclean. Any food items or other objects that have been in contact with contagious dampness [sic] and have been touched by them should be avoided. It is incumbent upon the believers to counteract the machinations and perversity of this misguided sect.⁶²

Khamenei's official website includes other similar statements, one particularly asserting that "all believers...must prevent others from deviating [from the right path] and joining Baha'is." Another statement identifies Baha'is as "the enemies of your religion and faith," emphasizing: "Avoid any interactions with them."⁶³

Grand Ayatollah Makarim-i Shirazi has made similar statements, one of which is particularly revealing in terms of the motivations behind prohibiting Muslims from interacting with Baha'is. Makarim-i Shirazi asserts that "any forms of association" with Baha'is is "religiously prohibited, *except in cases where there is hope of guiding them* [to the right path] (emphasis added. Translation quoted in

⁶⁰ Baha'i International Community (2016, October): p. 19

⁶¹ See his answers to questions regarding the permissibility of interacting with Baha'is on the page titled "Laws about the Infidels" [ahkam-i kafir]. Retrieved at <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/treatise-content?id=23-328>

⁶² Translation quoted in Baha'i International Community (2016, October): p. 14

⁶³ On Khamenei's forbidding interactions with Baha'is, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/treatise-content?id=121&pid=121&tid=-1>

BIC, 2016, p.14).⁶⁴ One wonders if so much emphasis on avoiding interactions with Baha'is stems from the fear of the reverse of what the ayatollah is indicating as the condition for the permissibility of contacts with Baha'is, i.e., them influencing Muslims in their beliefs. Other ayatollahs including Nehjat and Nouri Hamadani have issued similar *fatwas* on Baha'is being "unclean," the latter adding: "They are more unclean than dogs."⁶⁵

The severity of the apprehension of the clerics in power in Iran regarding the intermingling of Muslims with Baha'is was epitomized by the uproar created by a visit a famous Muslim woman paid to her Baha'i former co-prisoner when the latter was temporarily out of prison on a furlough. Faezeh Hashemi, the daughter of Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (d. 2017) one of the founders of the Islamic Republic and the head of the Expediency Council had been, for six months in 2012, in prison where she made friends with other women including Fariba Kamalabadi, who had a ten-year sentence as one of the seven members of Yaran, the *ad hoc* committee running the affairs of the Baha'is of Iran in the absence of institutions of the Baha'i Administrative Order which were dissolved by the order of the government. The uproar this visit created included open protests from a number of the high-ranking clerics. Ayatollah Batha'i Gulpayigani called Hashemi's move a "[move] which would also hurt [the situation of] her father," and "it was a mistake, a mistake, a mistake!" Ayatollah Muhsin Mujtahid Shabistari, a member of the Expediency Council reminded all that friendship with Baha'is is "against the Islamic teachings," and explained that in general interaction with "infidels" should be limited because "it is possible that their thought and behavior influence the Muslims."⁶⁶ Such harsh reactions on the part of the high-ranking clerics rejecting a short visit were no doubt aimed at preventing the normalization of interactions between Muslims and Baha'is.

At times, attempts to prohibit Muslims from associating with Baha'is, sadly, begin at middle or even elementary school. Muslim students who befriend their Baha'is classmates have on occasions been told by school authorities that associating with Baha'is is harmful and must be discontinued.⁶⁷

Seen in light of the Islamic Republic's obsession with distancing the general public from Baha'is, one can conclude that dismissing Baha'is from universities and jobs is not only about preventing their progress and development. Such

⁶⁴ See the original Persian of this statement and similar ones on the page "Baha'iyān," on Makarim-I Shirazi's website: <http://portal.anhar.ir/node/15327/?ref=sbttl - gsc.tab=0>

⁶⁵ Quoted in Baha'i International Community (2016, October): p. 14

⁶⁶ "Vakunish'ha bih didar-i Fa'izih Hashimi ba 'uzv-i Arshad-i Baha'iyat" (2016, May 14)

⁶⁷ For the account of an Iranian woman of such an episode, see Qurbani, M. (2018)

measures also seek to ensure that Baha'is have few opportunities to intermingle with colleagues and classmates. The government fears that any long-term interaction may open the door to an exchange of ideas and a flow of information regarding Baha'i beliefs and principles.

Demonization of Baha'is

Ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the government of Iran has consistently pursued a project to demonize Baha'is. Religious leaders and other individuals disseminate hateful statements about Baha'is in the government-controlled media, referring to the Baha'i Faith as the "misguided sect." Accusations ranging from moral perversity (advocating free sexual relations and incest) to political (being the creation of the British and the spies of Israel and the United States) are constantly levelled against Baha'is in the media, newspapers, and polemical books, without ever giving Baha'is an opportunity to defend themselves against such accusations.⁶⁸ The recurring themes of anti-Baha'i propaganda have been carefully chosen to create among Iranians the feeling that Baha'is are "outsiders in their own land" who deserve to be marginalized and discriminated.⁶⁹ As noted by Moinipour, through demonization and dehumanization, the Iranian regime attempts to banish Baha'is from the realm of moral norms and human rights so that "they are not seen as 'humans' and, therefore, can be tortured and/or killed."⁷⁰ In addition to seeking to justify the regime's persecution, such demonization also serves the function of barring the majority of the nation from being informed of the actual beliefs and practices of Baha'is.

Apprehension about the spread of Baha'i ideas is connected to the Iranian regime's fear "of anything that might cast Baha'is in a good light."⁷¹ The government has suppressed any social and economic development project in which Baha'is, despite their limited means, have participated. Examples include providing tutoring in literacy for disadvantaged youth in Shiraz in the early 2000s; kindergarten level education for children in the aftermath of an earthquake in 2003 in the city of Bam; and humanitarian assistance provided in August 2012 in East Azerbaijan. In all these cases, Baha'is who sought to serve their countrymen were arrested and detained.⁷²

⁶⁸ Baha'i International Community (2011, October)

⁶⁹ Baha'i International Community (2016, October): pp. 50-53

⁷⁰ Moinipour, S. (2018): pp. 30-31

⁷¹ Baha'i International Community (2016, October): p. 82

⁷² Ibid., p. 82

Conclusion

In their analysis of the 1991 “Baha’i Question” memorandum, the BIC mentioned in 1993 that it represented a shift from overt tactics such as executions to more covert ones focusing on social, economic and cultural restrictions. An overview of the Islamic Republic’s dealings with Baha’is in the twenty-seven years that have passed since the issuance of the 1991 memorandum shows that in all areas of Baha’i persecution, including economic, educational, and issues related to physical safety, there has been shift towards tactics that accomplish the government’s goal of blocking the development of the Baha’i community with the least possible repercussions before the international community. In the area of higher education, in response to the international outcry about the outright exclusion of Baha’is, finally, after twenty-five years, the government permitted a number of Baha’is to take part in the university entrance exam, only to exclude them in later stages—or it admitted some students, only to dismiss most in the middle of their studies, thus allowing only few Baha’is to continue their education—seeking, by such measures, to “prove” to international agencies that Baha’is are not deprived from higher education. Additionally, the government perfected its tactics in imposing steady and ever-increasing economic limitations on Baha’is using ways difficult to document and bring to the attention of the world, such as imposing paralyzing bureaucratic measures that make acquiring or renewing work permits exceedingly difficult if not impossible for Baha’is. In the area of physical safety of Baha’is, as we saw, official executions, which were the greatest source of international attention to the plight of Baha’is of Iran, have ceased. Sadly, sporadic murders with impunity and various acts of violence replaced them. The government’s lack of interest and intention in punishing the culprits suggests its complicity. At one level the goal of all these measures seems to be eradicating the Baha’i community.

At another level, this paper also showed that the government is particularly keen on preventing the dissemination of Baha’i teachings and ideas. This in fact seems to be its ultimate goal in persecuting the Baha’i community. In the steps the government has taken to alienate Iranians from their Baha’is compatriots; in issuing and disseminating fatwas discouraging Muslims from interacting with them; in demonizing them through propaganda; in arresting and imprisoning Baha’is solely because they have shared the Baha’i teachings with their non-Baha’i compatriots; and in the fact that at least two of the murders have occurred explicitly after the victim talked about the Baha’i Faith and its teachings—all of these measures support the argument that at the heart of all the pressures the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran exerts on Baha’is lies its fear of the spread of Baha’i teachings, teachings it knows can attract the hearts of many Iranians.

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