

Islamic Republic of Iran – Denial of the right to education for Bahá'ís (April 2018)

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I. An overview of the denial of the right to education

Since the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, members of the Bahá'í Faith have been the subject of a relentless campaign of persecution. This persecution has impacted the lives of generations, from young infant to frail elderly. Iranian law and official state policy denies Bahá'ís of many fundamental human rights including, *inter alia*, civil, political, economic, and cultural rights to education, work, freedom of religion, and freedom from arbitrary detention. Since the early 1980s, over 200 Iranian Bahá'ís have been executed or murdered, thousands arrested, detained, and interrogated, and tens of thousands more deprived of jobs, pensions, and educational opportunities. The Bahá'í community's holy places, cemeteries, and properties have been confiscated, vandalized, or destroyed, and many Bahá'ís have had their homes and other properties seized or damaged.¹

Regarding the right to education in particular, members of the Bahá'í Faith have long been denied access to higher education and Bahá'í schoolchildren and youth have routinely been subjected to exclusion and harassment.

A. Years immediately following the Islamic Revolution

Shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, large numbers of Bahá'í children and youth were expelled from school. The expulsions were not systematic, focusing mainly on children who were most easily identified as Bahá'ís, but they ranged across the entire education system, from primary and secondary levels through university, where the ban was virtually total.

¹ For more general information about the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran, please visit: <https://www.bic.org/focus-areas/situation-iranian-bahais>.

In the 1980s, partly in response to international pressure, primary and secondary schoolchildren were allowed to re-enrol. However, the government maintained the ban on the entry of Bahá'í youth into public and private colleges and universities. In fact, this was done in compliance with official state policy to expel Bahá'ís from universities and vocational training institutions as soon as they were identified as such. This policy is summarized in an Iranian government memorandum² obtained by the then-United Nations Special Representative on Iran in 1993. Produced in 1991 by Iran's Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, signed by the Council's then-Secretary, Hujjatu'l-Islam Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, and approved by the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, this document, stamped "confidential", concerning "The Bahá'í Question", sets forth specific guidelines for dealing with the Bahá'ís. The memorandum calls for Iran's Bahá'ís to be treated so "that their progress and development shall be blocked." It indicates, for example, that the government aims to keep the Bahá'ís illiterate and uneducated, living only at a subsistence level. The section defining the "educational and cultural status" of adherents to the Bahá'í Faith includes the instruction that:

(...) 2. 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 Bahá'ís. (...)

B. Shift to covert strategy to deny rights to education

Before 2004, the government used a simple mechanism to exclude Bahá'ís from higher education: it required that everyone who takes the national university entrance examination to declare their religion. Applicants who selected an option other than one of the four officially recognized religions in Iran—Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism—were excluded. For Bahá'ís, it is a matter of religious principle to refuse to lie or dissimulate about their belief, therefore pretending to be a Muslim for the sake of going to university was unconscionable.

In 2006, as a result of extensive protests over the continued exclusion of Bahá'ís from universities, representatives of Iran informed the international community on several occasions that the reference to religion that was included on the university forms did not identify applicants by their religion but only specified the religious subject on which they were to be examined. The Bahá'í community, in good faith, accepted the explanation offered. Since then, Bahá'ís have attempted to sit for the annual national entrance examination, although the difficulties they have encountered have caused their number to diminish from year to year. Nonetheless, most of those who have taken the examination have successfully passed it, some with the highest marks possible. For example, in 2006, around 900 Bahá'í students sat for the exam, of which nearly 500 passed and were listed as eligible to apply to university. Yet, of the roughly 200 who ultimately managed to enrol, the majority were gradually expelled over the course of the academic year as their identity as Bahá'ís became known to university officials.

Chief among the strategies to stifle the participation of the Bahá'ís in post-secondary education is a confidential communication sent in 2006 by the Director-General of the Central Security Office

² The text of the 1991 government memorandum can be accessed through the following links:

Persian original:

<https://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ran/1991%20Bahai%20Question%20Memo%20PER.pdf>;

English translation:

<https://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ran/1991%20Bahai%20Question%20Memo%20ENG.pdf>.

of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, Mr. Asghar Zarei.³ Referencing the 1991 memorandum, Mr. Zarei instructs 81 Iranian universities to expel any student that was found to be a Bahá'í at the time of enrolment or during his or her studies, adding that universities should take measures to prevent further enrolment by Bahá'ís. Following this, university enrolment forms began to systematically include a declaration of religion, and, to date, many officials do not allow this declaration to be left blank. Even during the academic year, university authorities have summoned students and demanded that they identify their religion. Whenever a student was identified as a Bahá'í, he or she was expelled.

In 2007, a year for which the Bahá'í International Community has complete data, 1,037 Bahá'ís registered for exams. But, in an evolving scheme to block them from higher education, some 800 were told their files were “incomplete” and were thus prevented from matriculating. Of the 237 who received their results, only 121 were admitted to university. Over the course of the year, more than 100 were expelled, and by the end of the second semester, only 17 students remained. For those few students who manage to be admitted, there are many cases where the student, on the verge of graduation, has been subjected to expulsion.

A few years later, in 2015, *Sanjesh*—the national academic evaluation and measurement organization of Iran’s Ministry of Science, Research and Technology—published a document titled “A guide to enrolling and participating in the national entrance examination for academic year 1394 [2015–2016]”.⁴ In this 50-page document, the authorities present detailed guidelines on the application process for students wishing to enter university in Iran, including criteria for admission. The first admission criterion is “belief in Islam or in one of the recognized religions (Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian) in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁵ This requirement of Iran’s own official admission document clearly provides proof of the purposeful exclusion of those who believe in the Bahá'í Faith.

II. The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education: An example of constructive resilience

In what *The New York Times* called “an elaborate act of communal self-preservation,”⁶ the Bahá'í community in 1987 established its own higher education program to meet the educational needs of as many of its young people as resources would allow. Because of the continual threat of persecution, the BIHE was forced to operate in a highly circumspect and decentralized manner. Most of its classes were held in private homes throughout Iran, and what little permanent infrastructure it had was composed of a handful of rented classrooms and laboratories.

Then, in an act that speaks volumes about the Iranian government’s true attitude towards Bahá'ís, hundreds of government agents fanned out across the country in September 1998, arresting some 36 BIHE faculty and staff, raiding around 500 homes, and confiscating hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of books, equipment, and records. In a 29 October 1998 article about this episode, *The New York Times* reported that the “materials confiscated were neither political nor religious,

³ A scanned copy of the original and English translation of the communication is available at “Archives of Bahá'í Persecution in Iran”: <https://iranbahaipersecution.bic.org/archive/bahais-must-be-expelled-university>.

⁴ <http://www6.sanjesh.org/download/sar94/sarasari.pdf> (in Persian).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The New York Times*, “Iran Closes ‘University’ Run Covertly By the Bahais”, 29 October 1998. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/29/world/iran-closes-university-run-covertly-by-the-bahais.html>>.

and the people arrested were not fighters or organizers. They were lecturers in subjects like accounting and dentistry; the materials seized were textbooks and laboratory equipment.”⁷

Over time, the BIHE gradually began to rebuild itself by shifting online and making use of volunteer educators living outside the country as professors and consultants. The BIHE’s commitment to high academic standards, international collaboration, and an innovating teaching and learning environment is increasingly recognized, and many of its graduates have been accepted into graduate-level programs in other countries.

In May 2011, the government again moved to shut the BIHE down, this time by arresting a dozen educators and administrators who supported the Institute’s operations on the ground in Iran. In the following weeks, several more were arrested, bringing to 19 the number of BIHE-affiliated educators arrested in 2011. Of those, 17 were ultimately tried and sentenced to terms of four or five years in prison. Their alleged crimes were described as “conspiracy against national security by establishing the illegal Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education” or “membership in the deviant Bahaist sect, with the goal of taking action against the security of the country.”

The fact that Iran would go so far as to imprison 17 Bahá’í educators simply for trying to provide the education that has been denied to Bahá’í students by the government itself shows the extent to which officials are willing to go to prevent Bahá’ís from obtaining higher education.

III. Denial of admission and expulsion from university: The current situation

This systematic discrimination against Iran’s Bahá’í youth has been highlighted by the international community time and time again. Last year, in his March 2017 report, the UN Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres, explained that “[i]n October [2016], at least 129 Bahá’í students who had satisfactorily completed their university entrance exam were reportedly excluded from admission.” In addition, last August, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, the late-Ms. Asma Jahangir, noted that “Bahá’ís continue to be denied their right to higher education, either by being banned from entering universities or by being expelled without a proper explanation. At least 15 Bahá’í students were expelled from Iranian universities between December 2016 and January 2017, with at least another six being expelled between January and May [2017].”⁸

As described above, every year hundreds of Bahá’í students are denied enrolment to universities and other institutions of higher education such as vocational training schools under the pretext of an “incomplete file”. The few students who are admitted to university without their religious affiliation being known are expelled when it is discovered that they are Bahá’ís.

In 2016, a number of Bahá’í youth who were studying in different universities across the country were expelled because of their Faith, including the following individuals who have agreed to make their case public:

- Ms. Elham Pakrou, who was studying computer engineering at Malard-Azad University;

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ A/72/322 (14 August 2017);

https://www.bic.org/sites/default/files/170814_report_of_sr_on_hr_in_iran_to_unga_2017.pdf.

- Ms. Sahba Avazpour, who was studying at the University of Applied Science of Kermanshah;
- Mr. Rabi Khalili, who was studying at the University of Applied Science of Kermanshah;
- Ms. Shomeis Pour-Shah- Rezaie, who was in her third semester in drama and film directing at Tehran–Azad University;
- Ms. Mehrnoush Shafi’ie-Mehr, who was studying applied science at Karaj-Imam Khomeini of Mohammad-Shahr University. Ms. Shafi’ie-Mehr had previously obtained a qualification in Applied Business Management from Semnan University of Amol; and
- Mr. Arsalan Mirzaie, who was studying materials engineering at Ahvaz-Shahid Chamran University. Mr. Mirzaie had been expelled from university once before, along with three other Bahá’ís.

It should be noted that while many Bahá’ís have appealed their expulsions, unfortunately, to date, all appeals to relevant authorities and/or through the courts have been rejected. Not a single expulsion case has ever been decided in favour of a Bahá’í. For example, after being denied admission to university for the 2014–2015 academic year on the basis of her religious beliefs as a Bahá’í, on 23 September 2014, Ms. Anisa Fanaian, from Karaj, filed a complaint against the *Sanjesh* at the Court of Administrative Justice. On 27 September 2015, the Court failed to uphold her complaint and confirmed the decision of the *Sanjesh* as required by the existing ruling of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution (i.e., the 1991 memorandum concerning “The Bahá’í Question”). Ms. Fanaian then filed a complaint to the Court of Administrative Justice against the decision of *Sanjesh*. On 5 July 2016, the Court of Administrative Justice decided that, based on the decision of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, the *Sanjesh* had acted properly, and Ms. Fanaian’s case was dismissed. A few months later, on 12 November 2017, Branch 1 of the Appeal Court of Administrative Justice upheld the previous decision to deny Ms. Anisa Fanaian’s admission to university and supported the ruling of the lower court. In the associated court documents, it states that the previous ruling had been issued according to the policy and regulations prescribed by law.

IV. Harassment and exclusion in primary and secondary school

Efforts to block the education and development of the Bahá’í community have also extended down to the primary and secondary levels. As noted above, all Bahá’í schoolchildren were initially banned shortly following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, but as a result of international pressure, they were gradually allowed to re-enrol after several years had passed.

Notwithstanding this, in recent years, there have been a number of incidents involving the harassment or even expulsion of Bahá’í primary and secondary schoolchildren. Oftentimes, these abuses are committed by their teachers and school administrators. Many pupils have been threatened with expulsion or forced to change schools. In hundreds of incidents, young Bahá’ís have been pressured to convert to Islam, obliged to use textbooks that denigrate and falsify their religious heritage, and have been singled out as their faith was attacked. Any child who has the courage to respond is severely reprimanded. They are also repeatedly told that they are not to

attempt to “teach” or discuss their religion with other students. Frequently, being identified as a Bahá’í leads them to be transferred to another school farther away from home.

Within only a two-month period, between January and February 2007, over 150 incidents were reported in ten different cities, and from October 2008 to February 2009, the Bahá’í International Community received reports of over 100 incidents in a dozen different localities. In parallel, schoolteachers were being “educated” about the Bahá’í Faith using materials that contain lies remarkably similar to those used in state-sponsored media propaganda that are designed to incite hatred and intolerance. Below are a few examples of the most recent cases of persecution against schoolchildren and youth:

- In February 2013, Mr. Matin Janamiyan Najafabadi, a Bahá’í high school student in Isfahan, was severely beaten at school, verbally assaulted, and had his religious beliefs insulted by his teacher. When his family lodged a complaint, the teacher stated that he personally knew members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and security officials, so their protests would have no effect.
- On 24 November 2014, Miss Layli Ziaie defended the Bahá’í Faith to her teacher and was told that she had to move to a new school now that her fellow students knew she was a Bahá’í.
- In April 2015, the following story was reported regarding Dana Jaber, a 13-year-old boy in grade seven from Fardis, Karaj. One day, his teacher, Mr. Esmailzadeh, informed the class that the Bahá’í Faith is useless and that they should avoid it. Dana told his teacher that what he was saying was wrong. He then spoke to the principal about this, who told the teacher that school is a place to teach, not to speak about religion. Afterwards, the teacher complained to Dana for having spoken to the principal and, following the incident, he did not allow Dana to speak in his classroom whenever he wished to do so.
- In October 2015, Aref Hekmatshoar, a third-grade student, was enrolled in a private primary school in Karaj and was subsequently expelled by the school principal specifically because he was a Bahá’í. Several human rights activists protested, even taking the case to the Ministry of Education. They included Mohammad Nourizad, who was once involved in persecuting Bahá’ís as a government official, but who has since become a strong advocate for Bahá’í rights in Iran. However, officials from the Ministry of Intelligence became involved and made threats to hand the boy over to child-welfare workers by having the father declared incompetent and arresting him. Despite these efforts to pursue justice, his parents were eventually forced to enrol him in a new school.
- On 17 October 2016, Mr. Iraj Dehghani of Isfahan was summoned to his son’s primary school by Mr. Barouti, the school principal. After arriving at the principal’s office, he was led to the hallway and intensely questioned about his son, Adnan, and his refusal to participate in the school’s obligatory prayer session. Mr. Dehghani provided an explanation about Bahá’í beliefs and expressed his support for his son’s decision. The principal warned him that if other students were learning about the Bahá’í Faith through Adnan’s non-participation in the obligatory prayer sessions, the principal would be compelled to put together approximately 15 CDs with comprehensive information about Adnan and send them to various offices, including the Ministry of Intelligence. He added that students receive a grade for performing obligatory prayers, which are conducted

every 35 days. The principal also stated that Adnan would be expelled from school if he did not participate in obligatory prayers.

V. Gross distortion or omission of the Bahá'í Faith in school textbooks

In Iran, school textbooks have either grossly distorted or simply failed to mention the Bahá'í Faith. Distortions and omissions are found in history textbooks, specially designed to be studied by pupils and students in schools throughout Iran. For example, in history books used in the third year of junior high school and in the third year of high school, information is given about the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths that is not only incorrect but also omits important episodes in the history of these religions. The books include the false claim that the Bahá'í Faith was created and supported by “foreign powers” such as the United Kingdom and Russia, supposedly with the purpose of generating disunity among the Muslims in Iran and to destroy their faith in Islam.

In May 2008, school authorities in Shiraz distributed a 12-page storybook entitled *The Deceitful Babak* to every primary schoolchild. The book indirectly but obviously refers to the Báb, the prophet-herald of the Bahá'í Faith, in an erroneous, mocking, and degrading manner.⁹

In addition, a 2008 study by Freedom House entitled *Discrimination and Intolerance in Iran's Textbooks* depicts how a distorted and incorrect account of the Bahá'í Faith is integrated in the grade 8 history textbook. The study states that, in a lesson entitled “Sect-Building by Colonialism,” the textbook provides the following about the Bahá'ís and the history of the founding of the religion:

“The British and Russian governments were extremely afraid of the unity of Muslims in Iran. Thus, they strove to sow discord among the people and destroy their unity. One of their goals in sowing discord was supporting new false religions. Among these false religions were Babism and Bahaism...”¹⁰

This leaves Bahá'í students in a difficult position. Faced with the negative discourse of the textbooks and the hostile treatment they receive in the course of their educational activities, they are either compelled to remain silent—and, in a way, in hiding—or give up pursuing their education.

Moreover, history books in Iran fail to acknowledge renowned Iranian historical figures associated with the Bahá'í Faith. Táhirih, also referred to as Qurratu'l-'Ayn, is a case in point. Not only was she one of the most prominent Iranian poetesses, she was also a pioneer in women's rights, widely recognized as the first woman to publicly remove the obligatory Islamic veil in 1848. In Iran, her poetry is ignored or sometimes attributed to other unknown individuals, including men. The selective amnesia of the Iranian government is not limited to books written and published in Iran. It also extends to expunging any content that concerns the Bábí or Bahá'í Faiths from the Persian translations of history books that are originally published abroad in other languages. Below are some well-known examples:

- Christopher Partridge's *The New Lion Handbook: The World's Religions* (Lion Books, 2005) was translated and published in Iran by the Iranian Society of History. In this

⁹ Copies of all these textbooks in the original Persian language are available upon request.

¹⁰ For the full report, please see https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/discrimination-and-intolerance-iranstextbooks#.VYQ7I_mqgHw.

translation, the entire chapter on the Bahá'í Faith was omitted, and all paragraphs or sentences in other chapters that mentioned the religion were also deleted. In a few remaining sentences containing the name Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, his name was replaced by "Ibn `Arabi", who was a 12th century Muslim philosopher and spiritual teacher from Andalusia, Spain.

- John Hick's book entitled *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* (London: Oneworld, 2004) was translated and published in Persian as: *بعد پنجم، کاوش در قلمرو روحانی، جان هیک، بهزاد سالکی (مترجم)، ناشر: قصیده سرا ۱۳۸۲*. In the translation, the following passage on page 85 was totally omitted: "But the most explicit teaching of pluralism as religious truth comes from the region between east and west, namely Iran (Persia). It was here that the nineteenth-century prophet Bahá'u'lláh taught that the ultimate divine reality is in itself beyond the grasp of the human mind, but has nevertheless been imaged and responded to in different historically and culturally conditioned ways by the founders of the different faith-traditions. The Bahá'í religion which he founded continues to teach this message in many countries today."
- In the translation of Dr. Franklin Lewis's book on Rumi, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West* (London: Oneworld, 2000), the reference the author made to Bahá'u'lláh was deleted.

VI. Conclusion

As demonstrated above, the denial to the right of education for Bahá'ís is a matter of official Iranian state policy. Although the situation has not improved significantly over the years, it has been proven time and again that international pressure on Iran can, at the very least, be effective in curbing their efforts.

We note that in May 2013, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended that Iran ensure that all citizens, regardless of religious belief, enjoy full rights without any discrimination. The Committee specifically referred to the Bahá'í community, expressing its concern that Iranian Bahá'ís face "widespread and entrenched discrimination, including denial of access to employment in the public sector, institutions of higher education, as well as to benefits of the pension system." The Committee also recommended "that the State party take steps to guarantee, in law and practice, the unhindered access of Bahá'í students to universities and vocational training institutions, and to prevent refusals of access and expulsions of students from such institutions based on their belonging to the Bahá'í community."¹¹ To date, no steps have been taken by the Islamic Republic of Iran to translate these recommendations into reality.

¹¹ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), Concluding observations on the 2nd periodic report of the Islamic Republic of Iran, adopted by the Committee at its 50th session, 29 April-17 May 2013: Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 10 June 2013, E/C.12/IRN/CO/2, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/52d547e54.html>.