

Situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran with respect to their cultural rights (November 2016)

We submit the following report about the situation of the Bahá'ís in the Islamic Republic of Iran as it relates to the infringement of their access to and enjoyment of their cultural rights.

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I. Introduction

Religious fundamentalist movements, such as the one which shaped the Islamic Republic of Iran, aim to reform society by changing laws, social norms and political configurations in accordance with a particular set of religious tenants. In such an environment, the cultural and social practices of minority religious communities are attacked as being blasphemous. The Islamic Republic of Iran sees the country's Bahá'í religious minority, which is the largest religious minority in Iran, as members of a "perverse sect", are considered apostates and are frequently persecuted on charges of disloyalty to the country. As a result, the cultural and social practices of the Bahá'í community are attacked and prohibited. This persecution has impacted the lives of generations, from young infants to frail elderly.

The persecution of the Bahá'í community is a matter of official state policy. This policy is confirmed in a 1991 Iranian government memorandum¹ obtained by the then United Nations Special Representative on Iran in 1993. Prepared by Iran's Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and approved by the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, this document, concerning "The Bahá'í Question", sets forth specific guidelines for dealing with the Bahá'ís. Stamped "confidential", the memorandum was signed by Hujjatu'l Islam Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, Secretary of the Council, and approved by Mr. Khamenei, who added his signature to the document. The memorandum specifically calls for Iran's Bahá'ís to be treated so "that their progress and development shall be blocked." It further states that, "A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots..." Its provisions, still in effect today, also include instructions that students "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."

Overall, there has been a continuation of the government's official policy of discrimination and persecution against Bahá'ís, marked by revolving door arrests, the denial of access to higher education, desecration and destruction of holy places and cemeteries, and a government campaign of anti-Bahá'í propaganda.

This report focuses on how aspects of Iran's policies, in effect, infringe on Bahá'ís access to and enjoyment of their cultural rights. It is essential that these policies and practices be exposed, as experience has shown that the Iranian government is quite sensitive to international pressure and global public opinion.

II. Desecration and destruction of Bahá'í holy places and cemeteries

Accessing and enjoying cultural heritage by individuals and communities is a part of their collective identity and development process. Not only is the Bahá'í community in Iran denied this very right, the Bahá'ís of the world, who recognize these sites as part of their collective history, are also being deprived of this innate human right.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a long history of systematically desecrating and destroying the historical and cultural sites of its Bahá'í community. Even prior to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the institutions of the Iranian Bahá'í community had never been allowed to hold property in their own name. This is problematic, as Iran is the birthplace of the Bahá'í Faith and the home of many historical and memorial sites. In order to maintain the properties for the Bahá'ís of the world, in 1958, a non-profit holding company was

¹ The text of the 1991 government memorandum can be accessed through the following links:
 Persian original: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5_TheISRCCdocument.pdf
 English translation: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/5_TheISRCCdocument_en.pdf

established in Iran under the name of Umana or “Trustees”. The first act of the Iranian government in 1979 was to confiscate the Umana Company, resulting in holding legal possession of all historical and cultural sites belonging to the Bahá’ís. Soon thereafter, numerous Bahá’í religious and cultural monuments and buildings were physically seized, desecrated and/or demolished. These acts were often mandated by Iranian authorities and undertaken by government workers or by individuals prompted by the campaign of incitement to hatred. Further steps were taken to destroy Bahá’í cemeteries in order to erase any historical record of the religious community. These aggressive tactics have been irrefutably documented; the following are examples of some of the most significant cases.

A. Bahá’í holy places and sites of historical significance

- The House of the Báb² in Shiraz, a place of pilgrimage for Bahá’ís all over the world, was confiscated on 26 April 1979 and destroyed five months later. It was initially confiscated under the guise of “protecting and preventing possible damage.” However, it became evident that this was not the case when on 1 September 1979 a demolition team, commissioned by the Attorney General of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, began to destroy the holy place. Ultimately, the building was razed and the Mosque of Mahdi was built over the site, in an attempt to expunge the historical significance of the place.



The House of the Báb in Shiraz, Iran, one of the most holy sites in the Bahá’í world, was destroyed by Revolutionary Guardsmen in 1979 and later razed by the government.

- Between March and April 1979, the Garden of Badasht—situated in the village of Badasht in the Semnan Province of Iran—where Bábís³ held their first conference in 1848, was demolished.
- The Home of Bahá’u’lláh⁴ in Darkula was demolished in 1979.
- On 24 July 1979, the holy site known as “the House of the Martyrs” in Arak was destroyed, and the remains of the people buried there were removed by an unknown group.
- The House of Bahá’u’lláh in Takur, where he spent his youth, was confiscated. In December 1981, it was completely destroyed and the land sold.

² The Báb was the prophet-herald of the Bahá’í Faith.

³ The followers of the Báb were known as Bábís.

⁴ Bahá’u’lláh was the prophet-founder of the Bahá’í Faith.

- In January 2004, a sacred site in Babul, the resting place of Mulla Muhammad-Ali Barfurushi, known as Quddus,⁵ was destroyed. The destruction was carried out with full cooperation from the authorities, despite the appeals and intervention by local Bahá'ís. The authorities went so far as to prevent the local Bahá'ís from retrieving the sacred remains.
- In June 2004, despite the historical significance to Iranians in general, the home of Bahá'u'lláh's father was ordered to be demolished. This site was associated with an important period in the history of the Bahá'í Faith. On the orders of Ayatollah Kani, the demolition was carried out in the presence of the Ayatollah's sons and Intelligence Ministry officials. The Iranian Bahá'ís found out that the mayor's office had received written instructions not to interfere with events pertaining to the building. They also talked to a few reporters who discovered that the demolition of this house was included in the list of topics about which they were not permitted to report.



The grave site of Quddus, an historic figure of the Bahá'í Faith, during its surreptitious demolition in April 2004. The site is located in Babol, Iran.



Interior of the house of Bahá'u'lláh's father, Mirza Abbas Nuri, an architectural landmark in Tehran, during its demolition in June 2004.

B. Bahá'í cemeteries

Historically, cemeteries play a significant part of the cultural identity as well as historical meaning for the surrounding living community. Scholars agree that these memorial sites are a means of learning the social constructs of a community. The desecration and destruction of Bahá'í cemeteries were methodically executed during post-revolutionary Iran as a means to strip the Bahá'ís of their cultural identity and to erase any ties to the community as a whole. For example, in 1981, the Bahá'í cemetery in Tehran was confiscated and closed, and thirteen cemetery employees were arrested by the orders of the Central Revolutionary Courts. Ironically, in 1993, a section of the Bahá'í cemetery in Tehran was excavated by bulldozers for the construction of a cultural centre. Approximately 15,000 graves were desecrated as a result of just one of the municipal excavation projects.

Between 2005 and August 2016, there have been at least 55 documented episodes where Bahá'í cemeteries have been vandalized or desecrated. Some cemeteries have been

⁵ An early apostle of the Bahá'í Faith.

desecrated several times. In a country where respect for the dead is the cultural norm, these incidents are especially concerning. The wave of attacks against Bahá'í cemeteries continues today, unabated. Below are a few examples of such attacks.

- In February 2005, the Bahá'í cemetery in Yazd was almost completely destroyed. The destruction of the cemetery was not limited to the surface; attackers went so far as to break into the coffins of the deceased. A threatening note was left at one of the homes of the Bahá'ís, stating, "You Bahá'ís take note. Go and see your cemetery... let this be a lesson to you."

- The Bahá'í cemetery in Najafabad, which serves five communities,⁶ was attacked four times in September 2007 and ultimately razed to the ground. On 27 September, the entire cemetery was levelled, leaving no trace of its existence. In the final attack, in November 2007, the provincial Natural Resources Division put up a sign at the site stating, "Possession and burial in this area is subject to legal prosecution." Further, in 2009, the graves in the Bahá'í cemetery of Najafabad, were covered over with soil. Families went to the



Gravestones in the Bahá'í cemetery near Najafabad, Iran, were left in a heap by a bulldozer that destroyed the burial ground in September 2007.

cemetery and uncovered the graves, removing the soil that had been piled on top of them. Subsequently, the former custodians of this cemetery were summoned for questioning. On 21 May 2009, a large sign had been placed alongside the graves, stating: "This cemetery has been transferred to the Municipality pursuant to letter no. 4080 dated 21 January 2009 of the Department of Natural Resources of Najafabad District. Therefore, any presumption of ownership or burial on this site is absolutely forbidden and violators will be legally prosecuted pursuant to section 635 of Islamic Penal Law that deals with illegal burial of the dead." Moreover, the local municipality received an order from the Intelligence Ministry, instructing them to refuse to provide ambulance service for Bahá'ís to transport the bodies of the deceased to the cemetery.

- The cemetery in Marvadasht has been repeatedly vandalised. Eyewitnesses recounted that in August 2007, a member of the clergy entered the Bahá'í cemetery accompanied by three others; they demolished sections of the irrigation system and cut tree branches. The Bahá'ís in Marvadasht contacted the police and the Governor General of the province to request an investigation. One of the candidates for the

⁶ Amirabad, Goldasht, Najafabad, Vilashahr and Yazdanshahr.

Islamic Consultative Assembly said that, if he were elected, he would undertake to demolish the Bahá'í cemetery. In the fall of 2009, the Bahá'í cemetery was vandalized again, and 200 trees were uprooted.

- In September 2007, in Miandoab, the remains of a member of the community buried in the Bahá'í cemetery were also exhumed. The Iranian Bahá'ís noted that these distressing incidents demonstrate the depths to which those who perpetrate such acts are willing to descend: not satisfied with vandalizing graves, they also defile the remains of the deceased.
- In November 2007, a grave that had been destroyed two years earlier in the Bahá'í cemetery in Abadeh and subsequently repaired, was attacked again. The remains were exhumed and crushed under the wheels of a vehicle, with a few bones left beside the grave.
- In October 2008, the Bahá'í cemetery in Darzikola (a small town near Ghaemshahr in Mazandaran province) was attacked several times—a cemetery which had been previously attacked in May 2007. On 17 October, a number of graves were desecrated. On 23 October, during the early hours of the morning, unknown individuals used at least one bulldozer to cause extensive damage to the cemetery. A report published by the Human Rights Activists in Iran estimated that over 80% of the graves had been desecrated.⁷

Less than a month later, in mid-November 2008, about 20 people approached the same Bahá'í cemetery with a bulldozer, clearly intending to destroy it, but they were stopped by a group of Bahá'ís who were guarding the cemetery at the time. The Bahá'ís stood in front of the bulldozer and refused to move unless presented with an official demolition order—otherwise, they said, the bulldozer would have to run over them to get in. The driver of the bulldozer was given an order to proceed, but he refused and left, then the group of vandals also scattered. Only a few days later, however, at 4:00 a.m. on 21 November, a group of masked men came back to the cemetery with three front-end loaders. A Bahá'í who lives nearby heard the noise and rushed to stop them, but they tied him up and destroyed the cemetery this time.

As soon as they could, the local Bahá'ís took up the arduous task of sorting through the rubble to match the graves with the headstones. The local Bahá'í community, who had already begun legal proceedings after the attack in October, continued to

⁷ Human Rights Activists in Iran (also known as HRAI and HRA) is a non-political non-governmental organization composed of advocates who defend human rights in Iran. HRAI was founded in 2006.

pursue the matter in court. Meanwhile, on 19 January 2009, at about 2:00 a.m., some officers from the municipality came to the cemetery again. Using a bulldozer with the lights turned off, they completely razed the cemetery to the ground.

- On 12 January 2009, government agents entered the Khavaran cemetery in southeast of Tehran and destroyed an entire section known as the “graveyard of the infidels”—an area of land where authorities had buried many of the people executed in the years immediately following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Among the graves were at least 15 Bahá’ís who had been members of the national or local Bahá’í governing bodies during the years before the Bahá’í sacred institutions were banned by the government. These prominent members of the community were rounded up and killed by government agents during waves of persecution in 1980, 1981 and 1984.

- The Bahá’í cemetery in Semnan was attacked during the afternoon of 15 February 2009. Some 50 gravestones were demolished and the mortuary (situated on the site) was set on fire. In addition, the attackers wrote graffiti on large steel water drums and tanks near the cemetery. The graffiti included insults degrading the Bahá’í Faith, death threats against “unclean, infidel Bahá’ís” and references to Israel and England.



The Semnan Bahá’í cemetery after it was vandalized in February 2009. Approximately 50 gravestones were demolished and the mortuary building was set on fire.

- In November 2011, in the City of Tabriz, agents of the Ministry of Intelligence interrogated a Bahá’í husband and wife. After asking them a number of questions about the Bahá’í community’s activities, the authorities stated that placing flowers upon the graves of the Bahá’ís who had been killed because of their beliefs is considered teaching the religion; they then asked the Bahá’í man to refrain from placing flowers on his father’s grave and tending the gravestone.

- On 12 December 2013, the Bahá’í cemetery in the City of Sanadaj was desecrated and portions were completely destroyed. The morgue, where bodies are washed, along with the prayer room, a water tank, and the walls of the cemetery were destroyed. The local Bahá’ís attempted to stop the acts but to no avail.



Images of the destruction at the Bahá’í cemetery in Sanandaj, Iran, which occurred on 12 December 2013

- In April 2014, Iran's Revolutionary Guard destroyed, through excavation, the Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz, where approximately 950 Bahá'ís were buried. The government's intention was to change the usage of the land. The local Bahá'ís requested that, if it was absolutely necessary to change the use of the land, any construction be in the areas of the cemetery where there are no graves. Numerous appeals were made to the commander in chief of the Revolutionary Guards, the municipality of Shiraz, the Friday-prayer Imam, the governor of the city, Iran's prosecutor general, and the head



Iranian Revolutionary Guards building a sports and cultural complex over a Bahá'í cemetery. This photo shows concrete being poured into the site where the graves of Bahá'ís were excavated in order to lay the building foundation.

- of the judiciary. All appeals, however, were disregarded, and all agencies approached denied any responsibility for the destruction of the cemetery. The Revolutionary Guard removed human remains from some 30 to 50 of the 950 graves of Bahá'ís in the cemetery, placing them in an open canal to make way for the construction of a cultural and sports complex. In June 2014, the Guards held a public celebration of their progress in clearing the site. In advance of that celebration, to which the media was invited, they used a heavy roller to compact the ground. A carpet was then laid over a number of graves and the commander of the Guards gave a speech attacking Bahá'ís, calling the Bahá'í Faith a "foul", "perverse sect".
- In November 2014 that earlier in the month, government agents closed the Bahá'í cemetery in Mahmoudiyeh, near Najafabad, Isfahan, denying the burial of deceased Bahá'ís. The officials have said that the cemetery would be open every Thursday for the Bahá'ís to visit the graves. The Bahá'ís have begun taking legal action in this regard.
- In 2015, in the City of Sangsar, the word, "ascension" (passing on) was removed from the tombstones of Bahá'ís with a grinding stone. The Bahá'ís were asked to fill out a form, giving a pledge to comply with the following with regard to burial in the Bahá'í cemetery: (1) Refrain from planting any trees in the cemetery; (2) Write only dates of birth and death on the tombstones; and (3) Refrain from expanding the mortuary and the landscape of the cemetery.
- During the first week of June 2015, a number of unknown individuals cut down the trees in the Bahá'í cemetery in Ghazvin.



Images of the Bahá'í cemetery in Ghazvin.

- On 21 August 2015, the Bahá'í cemetery in Oroumīyeh was vandalized. Approximately 120 flourishing trees that had been growing there for 15 years were cut down. The Bahá'ís in Oroumīyeh, in groups of fifteen, went to the relevant authorities to seek justice and demand that the action of the trespassers be stopped. This action continued for about two weeks, with groups of Bahá'ís each taking a different approach.

A little more than a year later, on 3 October 2016, the Bahá'í cemetery of Oroumīyeh was again attacked by unidentified individuals. Six trees were burned and a number of graves were damaged.

- On 14 July 2016, at around 5:00 a.m., the Bahá'í cemetery of Ghorveh was levelled to the ground in the presence of the Ministry of Intelligence agents. Bulldozers and other heavy equipment were used by the police to demolish the mortuary, funerary hall, boiler room and a store of coffins. Nearly 300 trees, all over twenty years old were knocked down and items of equipment that were not destroyed were taken away. The police then raised a banner stating “Buildings in this property was demolished by orders of the judiciary. The owner or owners may contact the Provincial Offices of the Jihad-e-Keshavarzi for information.”⁸

It was reported that this incident followed a sermon given by the new Friday prayer leader of Ghorveh. He is reported to have said, “I have come to this town to combat Bahá'ísm.” After the destruction of the Bahá'í cemetery in Ghorveh, a local Bahá'í approached Jihad-e-Keshavarzi and other relevant authorities and, as a result of his actions, he was summoned to the Public Court, was arrested and later released on bail. It is understood that no Ghorveh resident was willing to cooperate with the authorities and so, in order to carry out their plans, the authorities were forced to ask for help from the city of Malayer, which is 165 km away from Ghorveh.

⁸ Jihad-e-Keshavarzi: Ministry of Agriculture.

- On 22 July 2016, the trees of the Semnan Bahá'í cemetery were felled. The perpetrators have not been identified. Previously, in September 2014, the authorities in Semnan had asked for a pledge from the Bahá'í families of the deceased in order to issue permits to bury deceased Bahá'ís in the Bahá'í cemetery. In this pledge, the relatives of the deceased were required to indicate their relationship with the deceased, indicate their birth certificate number, and sign and comply with the six requirements mentioned on the form, including the prohibition of creating green space in the cemetery.

III. Gross distortion or omission of the Bahá'í Faith in history books and textbooks

In Iran, for at least a century, history books and textbooks have either grossly distorted or simply failed to mention the Bahá'í Faith. More than 20,000 followers of the Bahá'í Faith were killed during the early history of the religion in the mid-1800s in Persia, either by government forces or by mobs incited by religious leaders. Since then, historical and memorial narratives concerning Bahá'ís have been inaccurate and deliberately misleading. The Bahá'í Faith has never been recognized as a religion in Iran, and the current regime refers to it as a “perverse sect”, a cult, or an “illegal association”. Some conservative members of the Islamic leadership have been always determined to extinguish the new faith and suppress its followers.

Distortions and omissions are found in history textbooks, specially designed to be studied by pupils and students in schools throughout Iran. For example, in the 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 to generate disunity among the Muslims in Iran and to destroy their faith in Islam. In May 2008, school authorities in Shiraz distributed to every primary schoolchild a 12-page storybook entitled *The Deceitful Babak*. 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

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

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," in the Grade 8 textbook, the following is provided 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 Bahatism..."¹⁰ Bahá'í students are in a difficult situation. Faced with the negative discourse of the textbooks and the hostile treatment they receive in the course of education activities, they are either compelled to remain silent—and somewhat in hiding—or give up continuing their education.



Iran's campaign to demonize Bahá'ís seeks even to reach Iranian children, in an attempt to instill a lifelong prejudice against Bahá'ís. The above image is taken from the storybook entitled *The Deceitful Babak*. The book indirectly but obviously refers to the prophet-herald of the Bahá'í Faith, in an erroneous, mocking and degrading manner.

Moreover, history books in Iran fail to acknowledge renowned Iranian historical figures associated with the Bahá'í Faith. Táhirih Qurra'ul-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 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 from the Persian translation of history books (originally published abroad in other languages) any sections that concern the Bábí or Bahá'í Faiths. Well-known examples are:

- 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 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 Andalusian, Spain.

¹⁰ For full report, see https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/discrimination-and-intolerance-irans-textbooks#.VYQ7I_mqpHw.

- 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.
- In the late 1980s or early 1990s, a well-known book written by Bahá'u'lláh, entitled *The Four Valleys*, was published in an Islamic journal with the claim that it had been written by an “unknown Muslim mystic”.

We could also cite books published in Iran that are compilation of (or quoted from) articles that originally appeared in official media sources as part of the Iranian government's ongoing anti-Bahá'í campaign. *Kayhan*, the official Tehran daily newspaper, has been publishing defamatory and slanderous articles since October 2005: engaging in the deliberate distortion of history, making use of fake historical documents, and falsely describing Bahá'í moral principles in a manner that would be offensive to Muslims. A review of one book published by *Kayhan*, *The Light and Shade of Bahá'ism*, appeared online on 6 March 2007 at www.sohehadegh.ir. The book is a compilation of previously published *Kayhan* articles.¹¹ The review stated: “In this book, the hidden relations and secret, seditious activities of the Bahá'ism sect have been unveiled.” The reviewer encouraged everyone to read the book because it reveals “the intrigues of international conceit and arrogance towards Muslims” of this “sect”. *Sobhe Sadegh* publishes the views of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, through his Revolutionary Guard representative(s).

These are just a few examples that we have been able to obtain. In a country like Iran, omissions and distortions of this nature are of very grave concern because the government

¹¹ Copies of illustrative examples can be provided on request in Persian and in English translation.

is unrelenting in its incitement to hatred against members of the Bahá'í Faith and Bahá'ís have long been denied access to all means of communication with the public. Accordingly, Bahá'ís cannot counter the lies and calumny propagated about them and their religion, which in many cases come from those who give the Iranian people guidance in spiritual matters.¹²

It is, therefore, essential that such practices be exposed so that Iranian children, youth and adults can have access to an uncensored account of the country's historical and cultural diversity, enabling them to decide for themselves how they choose to interpret their history.

IV. Denial of access to education and academic freedom

A. Bahá'í children dismissed from school and harassed

Children and adolescents known to be Bahá'ís are subjected to harassment, vilification and psychological pressure in primary, middle, and high schools throughout Iran. Often 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. In only two months, January and February 2007, over 150 incidents were reported from ten different cities, and from October 2008 to February 2009, we 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, constituting incitement to hatred and intolerance. Below are examples of the most recent cases of persecution against children:

- On 24 November 2014, Miss Layli Ziaie defended the Bahá'í Faith to her teacher and was told that she has to move to a new school now that her fellow students know she is a Bahá'í.
- In April 2015, Dana Jaber, a 14 year old boy in grade seven from Fardis, Karaj, was harassed and reprimanded by his teacher because of his beliefs. Dana's teacher, Mr. Esmaelzadeh, had 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. Dana then spoke to the principal about this incident, who told the teacher that school is a place to teach not to speak about religion. Afterwards, the teacher

¹² See Section VI for specific examples about the consequences of this incitement to hatred.

complained to Dana because he had spoken to the principal, and since the incident, whenever Dana wants to speak in class, his teacher does not allow him to do so.

- In October 2015, Aref Hekmatshoar, a third grade student, was enrolled in a private primary school in Karaj and subsequently expelled by the school principal. Despite efforts being made by the family and two human rights activists to allow him to remain in the school, on 11 October 2015, his parents were forced to enrol him in a new school.

B. Access to higher education

As mentioned earlier, adherents of the Bahá'í Faith have long been denied access to higher education. Every year, for the past three generations, hundreds of qualified young Bahá'ís are prevented from entering public and private universities and vocational training institutes in Iran.

Several official documents provide evidence that the expulsion of Bahá'í students constitutes formal government policy. Chief among these is a communication sent in 2006 by the Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. Addressed to 81 Iranian universities (the names of which were listed), it instructed them to expel any student discovered to be a Bahá'í at the time of enrolment or during his/her studies.¹³ The communication also indicated that these instructions were being promulgated under “decree number 1327/M/S, dated 6/12/69 [25 February 1991]”. This referenced decree is the 1991 memorandum from the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, which was discussed above. The 1991 memorandum was also cited in an implementation letter from the Central Security Office of Payame Noor University to its regional branches in November 2006. A related letter in March 2007 mandated instructions “to prevent the enrolment of the Bahá'í applicants.”¹⁴ To this day, the 1991 memorandum is referred to as a justification of dismissal of Bahá'í students from university.

Furthermore, the government's denial of higher education to Bahá'ís is officially recorded in a publication issued by Sanjesh, the national academic evaluation and measurement organization of Iran's Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. Entitled *A guide to enrolling and participating in the national entrance examination for academic year 1394 [2015–2016]*, this 50-page publication presents detailed guidelines on the application

¹³ The 2006 letter to universities can be accessed at:

Persian: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/1_LetterFromMinistriesToUniversities.pdf;

English: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/1_LetterFromMinistriesToUniversities_en.pdf.

¹⁴ For the March 2007 letter, see:

Persian: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/2_LetterToPayam-i-NurUniversity.pdf;

English: http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/575/2_LetterToPayam-i-NurUniversity_en.pdf.

process for students wishing to enter university in Iran, including criteria for admission. The first admission criterion of the publication by Sanjesh states as follows on page 4 under the heading 'General Requirements':

“A belief in Islam or in one of the recognized religions (Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian) in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

This requirement of Iran's own official admission document clearly states that access to higher education in Iran is restricted only to those who believe in Islam or in one of the three other recognized religions specified in Iran's Constitution—thus excluding those who believe in the Bahá'í Faith.

Although Islamic teachings and Article 23 of the Iranian Constitution strongly forbid the investigation of individuals' beliefs, it is clear that Bahá'ís are denied their fundamental rights solely because they are identified as such. Most Bahá'ís are identified early in the university application process and are not even permitted to complete the procedure.

In the previous years, for example, Bahá'ís were told that their files were “incomplete” when they tried to get university entrance examinations results. When Bahá'í students sought their exam results online, many found the following written in front of their names:

“Please write to Post Office Box 3166-31635 Karaj, or go to the National Education Measurement and Evaluation Organization, Inquiries Unit.”

Several of them visited the above-referenced office in Karaj and made inquiries; they were all shown the Sanjesh publication.

During the 2014–2015 academic year, 300 cases of denial to higher education were reported. Bahá'í youth continue to be denied access to higher education in any form and from any source in Iran. In 2016, hundreds of Bahá'í students are denied enrolment to universities under the pretext of “incomplete file”. These individuals participate in the national examination and receive high scores, making them eligible for entry into university and yet they are denied the right to education only because they are Bahá'ís. A considerable number of Bahá'í youth who scored high grades in the national examination were either denied entry into university or were expelled during the academic year once it was identified that they are Bahá'ís. Below are some recent examples:

- In March 2016, two Bahá'í students were expelled from university in Kermanshah. Following these expulsions, their families went to the head of the university, the person in charge of university's security office and other university officials and requested clarification of the matter. The officials refused to produce any sort of

written response, or to provide any document related to the expulsions. They initially refrained from even recording their receipt of the letter of complaint. However, after ceaseless efforts made, some of their letters were finally recorded at the secretariat of the university. The head of Security Office provided an opportunity for the students to say goodbye to their classmates and lecturers. In these meetings, all the students and lecturers expressed their sadness about what had occurred.

- In April 2016, three Bahá'í students, one of whom was in term five of literature and another in term five of electrical engineering, were recently expelled from Payame Noor University in Oroumiyeh.
- In June 2016, a Bahá'í accounting student at Payame Noor University in Kashan was expelled for being a Bahá'í. Another young Bahá'í, who was studying medical engineering at Emam Reza University in Mashhad, was also expelled for being a Bahá'í.
- In June 2016, Mr. Faraz Karinkani Saysan—who had been attending as an undergraduate student the Institute of Higher Education of Ghiasoddin Jamshid Kashani (a private institution) since the beginning of this academic year—was expelled. The notification letter from the head of the Institute, dated 28 May 2016, explicitly states that the cause of expulsion is Mr. Saysan's belief in the Bahá'í Faith.

C. Academic freedom

Shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when all Bahá'í students enrolled at the time were expelled from university, Bahá'í university professors and lecturers were also summarily dismissed from their positions. In the late 1980s, the Bahá'í community made informal arrangements to begin offering university-level courses and vocational training to Bahá'í students, conducted through distance learning and in the privacy of Bahá'í homes, using the volunteer services of the Bahá'í professors who had been fired from their jobs. The Iranian government made repeated attempts to stop this quiet, peaceful initiative known as the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), most notably in 1998, 2001, 2003 and 2011.

Since May 2011, we have been documenting cases that concern educators and students arrested because of their participation in the work of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). At the time of the concerted attack against faculty and staff in 2011, nearly 300 people were serving the BIHE, including international volunteer educators who teach through the Internet. About 1,000 BIHE students were studying at home and in inconspicuous laboratories in privately owned premises. Seven individuals are currently serving prison terms ranging from four to five years, solely because they had been providing courses to young Bahá'ís with the capacity and deep desire to continue their studies beyond

secondary school. Educators, administrators or collaborators, these seven individuals have volunteered their time and skills to help young Bahá'ís with the advancement of their country.

Many of the Bahá'ís involved in the concerted attack in 2011 have been repeatedly harassed. The following represents only the most recent case:

- Mr. Peyman Koushk-Baghi and his wife, Mrs. Azita Rafizadeh (Koushkh-Baghi), who were former volunteer lecturers for BIHE, were waiting to serve their respective five and four year sentences under ta'zir law.¹⁵ One of the charges against them was "activities against national security through membership in BIHE". In April 2015, Mrs. Rafizadeh was summoned by telephone to serve her sentence, and on 5 May 2015, a hearing was held for Mr. Koushk-Baghi in the court of appeals. Subsequently, on Sunday, 28 February 2016, while visiting his wife in Evin Prison, Mr. Koushk-Baghi was arrested by the authorities and was taken into prison to start his five-year sentence. This arrest took place without any summons having been issued or warning given. By prior arrangement, the couple's only child, a six-year-old son is being cared for by a Bahá'í family in Karaj. The wife was also one of the 17 Bahá'ís who were arrested in a mass raid on the 39 residences of people associated with BIHE on 22 May 2011.

V. Artistic expression

The freedom of expression in domains such as the creative arts and music is an integral part of a community's cultural rights. The following are a few examples of how Iran's policies have infringed on the right of Bahá'ís to artistic expression.

- In 2014, two Bahá'ís were dismissed from their position as music teachers in Sari because they were Bahá'ís. The dismissal came about at the instigation of the Intelligence Office. One of the two individuals had already been arrested on 22 November 2008 and charged with "propaganda against the regime".
- In March 2015, a male student in the field of music from the University of Beiza in Shiraz was expelled because of his beliefs before the end of the semester. He was one of the best students in the program.
- In August 2015, three young Bahá'í music teachers were summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence Office and interrogated. One of them was told that she was no longer

¹⁵ Ta'zir law (discretionary punishment): Punishment with maximum and minimum limits determined by law and judge, respectively.

allowed to teach. Permission to continue to work was granted to two of them. However, a few days later they were also dismissed by the manager of the institute of music where they were employed, as a result of pressure placed on the manager by the Ministry of Intelligence.

- A Bahá'í artist and instructor of painting classes, philosophy and art history, Mr. Shahriar Cyrus, was arrested on the afternoon of 30 June 2015, when eleven agents of the Ministry of Information raided his home during a painting class. The agents transferred him to an unknown location after presenting a warrant and confiscating all Mr. Cyrus' personal belongings. He was subsequently held in solitary confinement for 48 days, and then released on bail. On 5 September 2016, Mr. Cyrus was sentenced to five years' imprisonment on charges of "forming an illegal organization and conspiracy against the Islamic Republic through the formation of a painting class". Mr. Cyrus has requested that his case be referred to the court of appeals.

VI. Economic oppression

For nearly 40 years, Bahá'ís have been systematically blocked from participating in Iran's economic life. Indeed, efforts to side-line their economic activity now extends down to the level of small, individually run shops and businesses, which are banned by government policy from many sectors of the economy. This policy and its effect on the cultural rights of Bahá'ís is fully described immediately below.

A. Sealing Bahá'í-owned businesses for temporarily closing to observe Bahá'í holy days

In 1980, the government began to dismiss Bahá'ís from public sector employment. Thousands were fired from their jobs in public education, government offices, hospitals and other government institutions. Prior to being fired, many were asked to convert to Islam and were subsequently dismissed for "having beliefs contrary to Islam" after they refused to recant their faith. The ban on Bahá'ís in the public sector became official in 1981. This prohibition against public employment remains in force. Once Bahá'ís had been completely barred from government jobs, attention was turned to the private sector, where in the 1980s, large numbers of companies and factories owned by them were confiscated and closed. Other companies were pressured to dismiss their Bahá'í employees, and banks were told to block their accounts. Moreover, the 9 April 2007 letter from the security unit of the Public Places Supervision Office (*Amaken*) to police commanders nationwide specifically excludes Bahá'ís from a wide range of businesses, including hotels and tourism, the food industry, jewellery, publishing, and those related to computers and the Internet.

More recently, the government has used a series of more sophisticated, covert tactics in their effort to destroy the economic foundations of Iran's largest religious minority community. In keeping with the 1991 memorandum's directive to deny Bahá'ís employment if they "identify" themselves, since 2014 authorities in dozens of localities around Iran have sealed the shops of Bahá'ís who dared to temporarily close in observance of Bahá'í holy days. In October 2014, for example, Iranian authorities descended on some 80 Bahá'í-owned shops in the cities of Kerman, Rafsanjan, and Jiroft, placing official seals of closure on their doors and posting banners saying the shops had been closed due to "violations of trading rules." It should be noted that, based on trade union laws in Iran, shop owners are allowed to close their stores for 15 days per year without the need to provide reasons for doing so.¹⁶ The shop owners were told they have violated the law by closing for a Bahá'í religious holy day, and they were asked to sign a statement: "I hereby promise to close my business place according to the law and calendar of the country, and will observe my religious holy days in coordination with the Public Places Supervision Office (*Amaken*) and the Trades Union Council." In other words, they were expected to observe national Muslim religious holy days but not their own.

This year, among the numerous cases that could be cited, the following are a few examples of the economic persecution described above.

- In March 2016, a Bahá'í, who had been a member of the Photographers' Union for the last five to six years and who had been appointed to serve in a position of some importance, was unjustly expelled from the Union. In 2015, the chairman of the board of directors of the Photographers' Union had given the Bahá'í the task of taking the photographs at a prestigious conference. This conference was attended by Ministers and Advisors to President Rouhani. A few days after the event, the Bahá'í was summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence Office, interrogated, and forced to resign both his position in and membership of the Union.
- Following last year's sealing of all the business premises owned by Bahá'ís in Rafsanjan, a number of Bahá'ís who repair appliances for a living, took on a limited number of repair jobs for some of the customers in the backyard or garage of their homes. Mr. Iraj Payandeh and Mr. Majid Payandeh subsequently received a written notice from the Trade Union that they are not permitted to work in the garage of their home. Therefore, they decided not open their garage door for business in order not to attract attention and did not go to the Trade Union. Notwithstanding this, on 26 June 2016, the garage door of their private home of the above-mentioned individuals was sealed by the Trade Union.

¹⁶ By way of background, there are nine holy days in a year during which Bahá'ís take time off from work.

- In May 2016, 15 shops in Ghaemshahr were sealed and shuttered by the government after the owners closed for one day to observe a Bahá'í holy day. During that same period, 28 shops in Oroumīyeh were similarly sealed, as were two shops in Kashan. In Isfahan, warnings were delivered to eight shops, suggesting they would be closed if Bahá'ís persisted in suspending work on their holy days.
- In October 2016, 11 Bahá'í business premises were sealed in Karaj. Across many localities, the expired business licences belonging to the Bahá'ís have not renewed by the Amaken.
- In November 2016, 132 Bahá'í-owned businesses in cities, including Sari, Ghaemshahr and Bandar Abbas, were sealed by authorities after they were temporarily closed to observe Bahá'í holy days on 1 and 2 November.

VII. Incitement to Hatred

The Bahá'í Faith is known to the world as an independent world religion, and its teachings advocate progressive ideals like equality for women and men. It emphasizes obedience to government, non-involvement in partisan politics, and assiduous efforts to promote the betterment of society. In addition, its moral code asks followers to uphold the highest standards of chastity, honesty, and trustworthiness. Yet, according to the picture painted by the Iranian media, Bahá'ís are “misguided” or “deviant” “Satanists” whose main concern is to overthrow the government through methods like the “corruption” of youth or spreading “propaganda against the regime.” Although it originated in Persia, Iranians are told that the Bahá'í Faith is simply a political creation, invented by Great Britain or other colonial powers to subvert Iranian nationalism—and purported today to be aligned with “Zionist” Israel.

Such false accusations seem purposely designed to inflame the sensibilities of a conservative religious audience. For example, it is maliciously claimed that Bahá'ís advocate free love or even orgies in their sexual practices—in addition to often having relationships with close relatives. The creation and maintenance of this grotesque picture of the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran is an ongoing project of the Iranian government, which has in recent years overseen or condoned the creation and dissemination of tens of thousands of pieces of anti-Bahá'í propaganda. This effort runs entirely against international law. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Iran is a signatory, states that “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.”¹⁷ Yet that does not stop government officials from directly spouting anti-Bahá'í hatred, nor does it stop the government-controlled media from disseminating hateful statements by religious leaders and others against Bahá'ís.

As of this writing, the most recent spike in such anti-Bahá'í propaganda came in May 2016 in response to a meeting between Bahá'í leader Fariba Kamalabadi and Faezeh Hashemi, the daughter of former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had been incarcerated together for three months. The meeting of friends who had once shared a jail cell sparked a storm of anti-Bahá'í rhetoric and hate speech by officials and religious leaders. The following are a few examples of the anti-Bahá'í statements published in Iran's media:

- “When false actions are not prevented, some people allow themselves to encourage Baháism. These actions have to be dealt with, as this is treason against the public and the martyrs, and anyone who befriends Baháism is a Bahá'í, himself.”
(General Muhammad-Reza Naqdi, the head of the Basij Foundation for the needy, 16 May 2016, *Basij Press*)



This illustration has been featured on several Iranian anti-Bahá'í websites. It shows a cult worshipper bowing before blazing tombstones that have been superimposed in front of a picture of the entrance to the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís naturally find such an image repugnant, as would the follower of any religion whose holiest site had been similarly depicted. Below is an actual photograph of the Shrine, which was recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage site, possessing “outstanding universal value.”

¹⁷ Article 20(2) of the ICCPR.

- “The question should be asked, what the House of Justice, or the command headquarters of Baháism is doing in Israel, and whether collaboration with such a network is a threat to the national security of our country.”
(Ayatollah Sadeq Amuli Larijani, 16 May 2016, *Fars News*)
- “Baháism is neither a group no a sect; rather, they are spies of Zionism, and have no other purpose for their mission except to spy for the Zionists, for which they gather together. Baháism does not even believe in the principles of their religion, and, I believe, the only reason for their emergence is espionage for Zionism, the United States and Britain.”
(Ayatollah Hassan Mamdui, a member of the Assembly of Experts, 21 May 2015, *Tasnim News*)

However, the spike in anti-Bahá’í propaganda in May 2016 was hardly an aberration. Since 2014, there have been more than 20,000 anti-Bahá’í articles, web pages, and broadcasts in the official or semi-official media that vilify, denigrate, mischaracterize, or otherwise attack the Bahá’í Faith or its adherents. The tone for this propaganda is set at the very highest levels of government. In an October 2010 nationally broadcast speech, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei categorized Bahá’ís as “enemies of the Islamic Revolution.” And in 2013, a series of fatwas, or religious decrees, by Ayatollah Khamenei that declared any interaction with Bahá’ís to be unlawful were published.¹⁸



Many anti- Bahá’í articles make extensive use of Jewish or Israeli symbols such as this montage with the Israeli flag that accompanied an 8 September 2010 story about how Bahá’í use water coolers to attract followers in Iran. The black words say “Baháism” in Persian.

According to a 8 June 2016 press release from the former Special Rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, “Verbal attacks by state officials against an already vulnerable community like the Bahá’ís are extremely troubling not only because they directly violate Iran’s international legal obligation not to discriminate against its citizens, but because they could encourage discrimination and possibly acts of violence against this group by others”. Since 2005 alone, the Bahá’í International Community have documented more than 68 physical assaults on Bahá’ís. Of these 68 incidents, are included at least nine cases of murder or killed under suspicious circumstances. Strikingly, not one of the attackers in these 68 cases has been prosecuted.

¹⁸ For a more complete examination of the themes of anti-Bahá’í propaganda in Iran, see “Inciting Hatred: Iran’s media campaign to demonize Bahá’ís,” a special report of the Bahá’í International Community, October 2011. www.bic.org/inciting-hatred

VIII. Conclusion

In a press statement dated 4 March 2016, the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Karima Bennounce, stated, “It is impossible to separate a people’s cultural heritage from the people itself and their rights.” Ms. Bennounce continued, “Clearly, we must now understand that when cultural heritage is under attack, it is also the people and their fundamental human rights that are under attack.” The Islamic Republic of Iran has explicitly—according to the once secret 1991 government memorandum—set a policy to destroy the “cultural roots” of the Bahá’í Faith. The desecration and destruction of significant Bahá’í holy places and cemeteries, along with government efforts to erase and distort Bahá’í history from textbooks, and the restriction of access to education, results in the impoverishment of all Iranians, who are ultimately deprived of important aspects of their own history and culture. Further, the Bahá’ís of the world, who recognize these sites as part of their collective history, are also being deprived of the possibility of keeping a historical record of their community. How are they to transmit their cultural heritage to future generations, when the government of Iran has instituted a campaign to erase the Bahá’í community from its national history? It is, therefore, essential that we heed Ms. Bennounce’s call to action and expose Iran’s policies and practices. The case for international pressure on Iran—which history has shown to be the best, and perhaps the only, method of restraining Iran’s theocratic rulers from acting on their deeply held prejudice against Bahá’ís—is clear.