

# *Closed Doors*

Iran's Campaign to Deny  
Higher Education to Bahá'ís

Bahá'í International Community





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## CHAPTER I

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# Overview

*“Everyone has the right to education.”*

— UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

**I**N THE PUBLIC mind, the right to education does not always rise to the highest level of concern. Other basic human rights — especially those concerned with rights to life, liberty and personal security — often seem more urgent. And to be fair, instances of innocent people being executed, thrown into prison, or tortured demand our immediate attention and action.

Yet in the long view, the denial of a person’s right to education is equally a denial of his right to exist as a free and productive human being. For without education, the individual is condemned to the prison of his own ignorance, tortured over his lack of opportunities, and, more than likely, consigned to a life of poverty, underdevelopment, and oppression.

It is a terrible tragedy that so many millions of people around the world are unable to exercise their basic right to education. In most cases, however, it is not a matter of will but of resources. In the developing world, especially, many governments simply do not have the infrastructure to provide their young people with an adequate education.

But it is an entirely different matter when a government willfully seeks to deprive its people— or a group of its people — from receiving an education. Sadly, that is the case in present day Iran.

Since 1979, the government of Iran has systematically sought to deprive its largest religious minority of the right to a full education. Specifi-

cally, the Islamic Republic of Iran has for more than 25 years blocked the 300,000-member Bahá’í community from higher education, refusing young Bahá’ís entry into university and college. The government has also sought to close down Bahá’í efforts to establish their own institutions of higher learning.

This action comes against a wider picture of

***The efforts of the Iranian government to deny Bahá’ís the right to education can only be seen as a coordinated effort to eradicate the Bahá’í community as a viable group within Iranian society.***

persecution of the Iranian Bahá’í community that has included arbitrary executions, unjustified imprisonment, the confiscation of property, and severe restrictions on freedom of religious practice and worship. Since the Islamic government came to power, more than 200 Bahá’ís have been killed, hundreds have been imprisoned, and thousands have had property or businesses confiscated, been fired from jobs, and/or have had pensions terminated. Bahá’í holy sites have been destroyed, the community’s elected administrative structure has been dismantled, and Bahá’ís have been denied



a host of other rights, ranging from freedom of movement to simple inheritance rights.

Against that backdrop, the efforts of the Iranian government to deny Bahá'ís the right to education can only be seen as a coordinated effort to eradicate the Bahá'í community as a viable group within Iranian society.

Indeed, a careful examination of Iran's persecution of the Bahá'í community reveals that the Iranian government has long sought specifically to completely block the "progress and development" of the community — as outlined by the government in a "secret" memorandum that surfaced in 1993. [See *"Iran's Secret Blueprint for Repression,"* page 9.]

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In the face of an international outcry over the most blatant elements of its oppressive behavior, the Iranian government has in recent years plainly acted to moderate its violations. The killing and imprisonment of Bahá'ís has largely been halted.

Yet any fair-minded reading of the situation reveals that the government has not abandoned its ultimate objective of destroying the Bahá'í community — and that it persists towards this goal while seeking trade and other forms of favorable treatment from the West.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the government's continuing effort to prevent Bahá'ís from obtaining higher education.

## The Current Situation

**I**N CONTRAST TO its campaign of outright killing, imprisonment, and torture of Bahá'ís during the 1980s, the Iranian government has in recent years focused largely on economic and social efforts to drive Bahá'ís from Iran and destroy their cultural and community life.

Such measures include on-going efforts to prevent Bahá'ís from receiving higher education, to deny them the means of economic livelihood, and to deprive them of the inspiration provided by their sacred and historic sites.

The government has also used arbitrary arrests and detentions and the continued confiscation of personal property to keep the community off balance. As well, the threat of imprisonment and execution implicitly remains.

Above all else, the Bahá'í community remains without fundamental religious freedoms accorded to it in international human rights documents that Iran has signed. These include the right of Bahá'ís to freely assemble, to choose their leadership, and to openly manifest their religion “in worship, observance, practice and teaching.”

### Denial of Access to Education

The government's efforts to deny Bahá'í youth access to higher education perhaps most clearly demonstrate the lengths to which the Iranian government is willing to go in its campaign of quiet strangulation.

Shortly after the 1979 Islamic revolution, large numbers of Bahá'í youth and children were expelled from school. The expulsions were not systematic, focusing mainly on children who were most strongly identified as Bahá'ís, but they ranged across the entire education system, from primary, through secondary, to the college-level,

where the ban was virtually total.

In the 1990s, partly in response to international pressure, primary and secondary school-children were allowed to re-enroll. However, the government has maintained the ban on the entry of Bahá'í youth into public and private institutions of higher education.

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The government has used a very simple mechanism to exclude Bahá'ís from higher education: it has simply required that everyone who takes the national university entrance examination declare their religion. And applicants who indicate other than one of the four officially recognized religions in Iran — Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism — are excluded.

One young Iranian Bahá'í explained it this way: “In Iran, you have to apply for an examination to go to college. If you are successful at your exam, you can go to university. There is a place [on the examination form] which asks, ‘What is your religion?’ It has items just for Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism. And all of us [the Bahá'í students], we didn't write anything at that place. On the left side I just wrote ‘Bahá'í.’ So they don't let us take that

examination. They didn't give us the entrance card to go to the examination hall. So we can't even take the exam."

Being denied access to higher education for years has had a demoralizing effect on Bahá'í youth, and the erosion of the educational level of the community is clearly aimed at hastening its impoverishment. The Bahá'í Faith places a high value on education, and Bahá'ís have always been among the best-educated groups in Iran.

In the late 1980s, Bahá'í sought to mitigate the effects of the ban by establishing their own

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institution of higher education. Known as the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), the Institute offered classes in private homes throughout the country, augmented by a scattering of specialized classrooms, laboratories and libraries. At its peak, the Institute enrolled more than 900 students. [See "The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education," page 19.]

The Institute, however, was in large part shut down in 1998 when agents of the government staged a series of raids, arresting at least 36 members of the BIHE's faculty and staff and confiscating much of its equipment and records.

The raids on the Institute, however, drew considerable international attention to the govern-

ment's oppressive policies. Human rights organs at the United Nations called for an end to religious discrimination against Bahá'í students, and various governments have pressed Iran to allow Bahá'ís back into university.

Apparently in response to this pressure, the government officially announced in late 2003 that it would drop the declaration of religious affiliation on the application for the national university entrance examination.

This, Bahá'í youth believed at the time, cleared the way for them to take the examination and to enroll in university in the fall of 2004.

The removal of the data field asking for religious affiliation was critical to Bahá'í youth who sought to enter university. The government had always said that if Bahá'ís simply declare themselves as Muslims, they would be allowed to enroll. But for Bahá'ís, who as a matter of religious principle refuse to lie or dissimulate about their belief, even pretending to be a Muslim for the sake of going to university was unthinkable.

## False Promises

With the promise that religious affiliation would not matter, about 1,000 Bahá'ís accordingly signed up for and took university entrance examinations in 2004. And, indeed, no field declaring religion was on the papers.

Students were asked to take a religious subject examination, however. It came as part of the whole range of subject tests relating to mathematics, language, history, and so on. The religion tests were offered in four subjects, Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism, corresponding to the four recognized religions in Iran.

Most Bahá'í students opted for the Islamic subject test since, as the majority religion, Islam is taught in all schools and most Bahá'ís accordingly have a solid familiarity with its teachings.

In August, however, when the examination results were mailed out, government authorities had printed the word "Islam" in a data field listing a prospective student's religion.



“This duplicity astounded the Bahá’í community,” the Bahá’í community of Iran wrote in a letter to Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, referring to the incident. “Alas, the joyful news that the question about the religion of the applicants had been omitted from the national university entrance examination...was quite short-lived.”

When confronted by Bahá’ís, officials cyni-

cally explained they did that on the assumption that choosing to take the subject test on Islam amounts to a de facto declaration of faith in Islam.

The government’s intentions were further revealed when a group of Bahá’í students complained to officials at the national Educational Measurement and Evaluation Organization

*continued on page 12*

## Iran’s Secret Blueprint for Repression

“**T**HEY 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.”

Iran’s efforts to deny Bahá’ís access to higher education must be seen in the context of an overall effort by the government to destroy the Bahá’í community as a cohesive entity.

This effort was outlined in a secret memorandum, written in 1991 and unearthed in 1993, that established a national policy aimed at the quiet strangulation of the Bahá’í community.

Its measures essentially dictate that Bahá’ís should be kept illiterate and uneducated, living only at a subsistence level, and fearful at every moment that even the tiniest infraction will bring the threat of imprisonment or worse.

The 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.

The memorandum was drawn up by the Iranian Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council (ISRCC) at the request of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the then President of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Stamped “confidential,” it 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.

Its central focus is a call for Iran’s Bahá’ís to be treated in such a way “that their progress and development shall be blocked.”

To accomplish this, the memorandum specifies that Bahá’ís should be denied “positions of influence,” and instead only be allowed to “lead a modest life similar to that of the population in general”; and even that “employment shall be refused to persons identifying themselves as Bahá’ís.”

In terms of education, the memorandum states that Bahá’ís “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.”

The memorandum further directs that Bahá’ís will be allowed to go to school only if they do not identify themselves as Bahá’ís, and that they should be sent to schools “with a strong religious ideology,” aiming clearly at wresting Bahá’í children from their faith.

*continued on page 10*

## THE ISRCC DOCUMENT

[Translation from Persian]  
[Text in square brackets added by translator]

In the Name of God!  
The Islamic Republic of Iran  
The Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council  
Number: 1327/....  
Date: 6/12/69 [25 February 1991]  
Enclosure: None

CONFIDENTIAL

Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani  
Head of the Office of the Esteemed Leader [Khamenei]

Greetings!

After greetings, with reference to the letter #1/783 dated 10/10/69 [31 December 1990], concerning the instructions of the Esteemed Leader which had been conveyed to the Respected President regarding the Bahá'í question, we inform you that, since the respected President and the Head of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council had referred this question to this Council for consideration and study, it was placed on the Council's agenda of session #128 on 16/11/69 [5 February 1991] and session #119 of 2/11/69 [22 January 1991]. In addition to the above, and further to the [results of the] discussions held in this regard in session #112 of 2/5/66 [24 July 1987] presided over by the Esteemed Leader (head and member of the Supreme Council), the recent views and directives given by the Esteemed Leader regarding the Bahá'í question were conveyed to the Supreme Council. In consideration of the contents of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as the religious and civil laws and general policies of the country, these matters were carefully studied and decisions pronounced.

In arriving at the decisions and proposing reasonable ways to counter the above question, due consideration was given to the wishes of the Esteemed Leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran [Khamenei], namely, that "in this regard a specific policy should be devised in such a way that everyone will understand what should or should not be done." Consequently, the following proposals and recommendations resulted from these discussions.

The respected President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as the Head of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, while approving these recommendations, instructed us to convey them to the Esteemed Leader [Khamenei] so that appropriate action may be taken according to his guidance.

## SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS OF THE DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

- A. General status of the Bahá'ís within the country's system
  1. They will not be expelled from the country without reason.
  2. They will not be arrested, imprisoned, or penalized without reason.
  3. The government's dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked.
- B. Educational and cultural status
  1. They can be enrolled in schools provided they have not identified themselves as Bahá'ís.
  2. Preferably, they should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing religious ideology.
  3. 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.
  4. 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.
  5. Propaganda institutions (such as the Islamic Propaganda Organization) must establish an independent section to counter the propaganda and religious activities of the Bahá'ís.
  6. A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country.
- C. Legal and social status
  1. Permit them a modest livelihood as is available to the general population.
  2. To the extent that it does not encourage them to be Bahá'ís, it is permissible to provide them the means for ordinary living in accordance with the general rights given to every Iranian citizen, such as ration booklets, passports, burial certificates, work permits, etc.
  3. Deny them employment if they identify themselves as Bahá'ís.
  4. Deny them any position of influence, such as in the educational sector, etc.

Wishing you divine confirmations,  
Secretary of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council  
Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani  
[Signature]

[Note in the handwriting of Mr. Khamenei]

In the Name of God!

The decision of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council seems sufficient.  
I thank you gentlemen for your attention and efforts.



(EMEO), asking if they could return the exam results with corrected information. A footnote in the letter conveying examination results said that incorrect names and addresses could and should be corrected and returned.

However, no mention was made about correcting religious information. Indeed, Bahá'ís were told by EMEQ officials that “incorrect religion would not be corrected” on the forms since the Bahá'í Faith is not among the officially recognized religions in Iran.

Shortly after that meeting, Bahá'í students wrote a letter of protest to the EMEQ. The students expressed, clearly, their objection to having been designated as Muslims after having been promised that they would not have to state their religion in order to take the entrance examination.

At first, EMEQ officials seemed to sympathize with their problem, even allowing Bahá'ís to fill out revised registration forms with no religious affiliation.

“Another glimmer of hope was thus kindled in the hearts of the Bahá'í youth, who immediately proceeded to meet with the authorities in order to choose their fields of study,” wrote the Bahá'í community of Iran in its letter to President Khatami.

However, even though some 800 Bahá'í students who had passed their examinations also met the new deadline for submission of the revised forms, only ten names were published in an EMEQ bulletin on 12 September 2004 announcing which students had been admitted to university.

It's worth noting also that many Bahá'ís received high scores on the examinations, and, in fact, many of them were passed over in the admission process, while many lower-scoring Muslim students were accepted.

In the end, out of solidarity with the rest of the 800 students who had been unfairly discriminated against, those ten Bahá'ís declined to register in the universities to which they had been

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accepted. And so, for the school year 2004–2005, Bahá'í young people were once again utterly deprived of access to higher education.

The Iranian government has continued to pursue its strange game for the 2005–2006 school year. By mid-August 2005, hundreds of Bahá'ís had received their university entrance examination results. And once again, the government had falsely printed the word “Islam” as the religious identification for the Bahá'í students.

For Bahá'ís, the entire process is cynically calculated to accomplish a number of government objectives. First, it apparently seeks to demoralize Iranian Bahá'í youth in an effort to induce them to leave the country. Second, it allowed Iranian authorities to identify by name those Bahá'ís with outstanding academic ability, who might at some point play a role in helping to revive the Bahá'í community's fortunes. Third, it allowed the Iranian government to say to international human rights monitors that they had given the Bahá'ís a chance to enroll — and that it was the Bahá'ís themselves who refused the opportunity.

Yet the government, of course, has long been aware that Bahá'ís cannot and will not as a matter of religious principle falsify or misrepresent their beliefs. Without doubt, then, Iran's actions amount to nothing less than government sponsored policy aimed at denying an entire generation of Bahá'ís their right to higher education.

## CHAPTER III

# The History of Bahá'í Educational Efforts in Iran

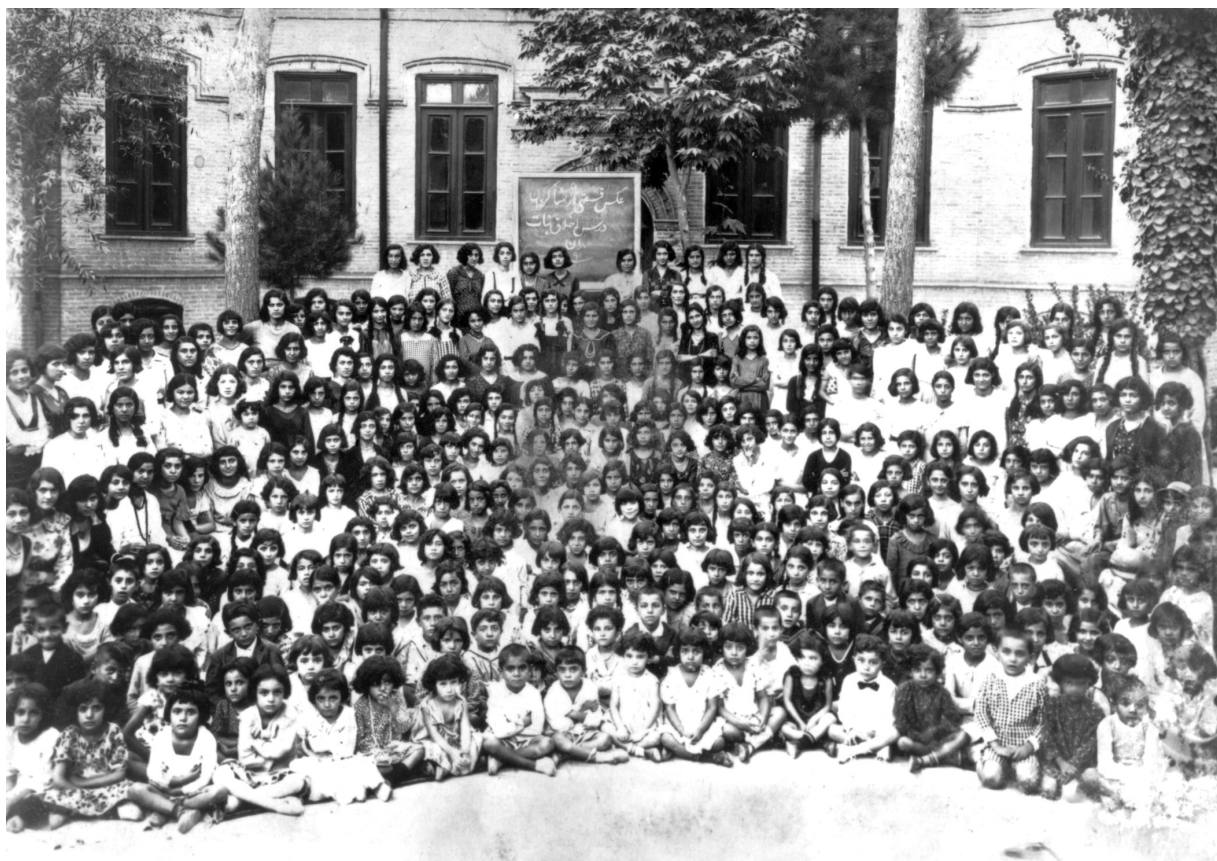
WHILE EXCLUSION FROM education is a grievous wrong in any circumstances, the situation for Iranian Bahá'ís is compounded by the degree to which the sacred writings of the Bahá'í Faith stress the primary importance of education in fostering humanity's material, social, and spiritual advancement — and the strong history of the Iranian Bahá'í community in seeking and providing education.

“Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom,” wrote Bahá'u'lláh.

Since the earliest days of the Bahá'í Faith, its followers have been deeply engaged in promoting learning and knowledge, establishing and operating schools, and seeking the best possible educational opportunities for their children and the children of others.

Nowhere has this been more true than in Iran, the birthplace of the Bahá'í revelation and,

*Before they were closed by government decree in 1934, Bahá'í schools in Iran attracted thousands of students. Shown here are participants in Bahá'í classes in Tehran with their teachers, in a photograph taken on 13 August 1933.*



*The Bahá'ís started some of the first girls' schools in Iran. Shown here are a group of pre-school girls at the Tarbiyat School for Girls in Tehran, circa 1930.*



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until the persecutions that followed the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, one of the best developed national Bahá'í communities in the world.

As early as the 1880s, small village-level schools were started by Bahá'ís in Iran, and the establishment of major primary and secondary schools in urban centers soon followed.

Around 1900, for example, the Madrisseh-yi Tarbiyat-i Banin (the Tarbiyat School for

Boys) was founded in Tehran, and by 1911 the ground-breaking Tarbiyat School for Girls had been established. Other Bahá'í schools likewise quickly sprang up in Hamadan, Qazvin, Kashan, and Barfurush.

The schools were open to all, and many children who were not from Bahá'í families enrolled. About half of the students in the schools in Tehran were not Bahá'ís, for example.

By 1920, some 10 percent of the estimated 28,000 primary and secondary school children in Iran were enrolled in Bahá'í-run schools, according to one source.

Although exact figures are hard to come by, it appears that more than 50 schools were founded and operated by Bahá'ís through the first half of the 20th century.

Sadly, most of the Bahá'í schools were closed by government decree in the mid-1930s in an episode of religious persecution. By that time, the schools had gained considerable prominence as top-notch institutions and had attracted numerous students from prominent families.



The government of Reza Shah, as part of a policy of standardization and Iranianization of all social institutions in the country, demanded that the Bahá'í schools close only on government-specified holidays. Bahá'í communities, however, required by the principles of their Faith to close also on Bahá'í holy days, refused to comply. In response, government officials suspended their licenses.

The Bahá'í community's strong commitment to education nevertheless remained. Bahá'í parents sent their children to the then expanding network of state-run schools and also set up special classes in private homes to ensure continuing training in moral and religious education.

Overall, this emphasis on education had a remarkable effect on the Iranian Bahá'í community. By the time of the mid-to-late 1970s, just prior to the establishment of the Islamic Repub-

*By the time of the mid-to-late 1970s, just prior to the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Bahá'í community was perhaps the best educated group in Iran, with many of its members working as doctors, lawyers, engineers, educators, and other professionals at the top levels of society.*

lic, the Bahá'í community was perhaps the best educated group in Iran, with many of its members working as doctors, lawyers, engineers, educators, and other professionals at the top levels of society.

*With their emphasis on the education of girls, Bahá'í schools promoted an entire generation of highly educated women in Iran. Shown here are members of the Bahá'í Committee for the Advancement of Women, in Tehran, 1950.*



## Bahá'í Quotes on Education

THE BAHÁ'Í SACRED writings emphasize the importance of education as the key to material and spiritual progress. The Bahá'í teachings exalt knowledge, promote free inquiry and learning, and emphasize the importance of acquiring expertise in such arts and sciences as will promote human prosperity. Here are some quotations from the Bahá'í writings about education and its importance:

*"Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom." — Bahá'u'lláh*

*"Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation. Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone." — Bahá'u'lláh*

*"Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may, through the power of the Most Great Name, be blotted out from its face, and all mankind become the upholders of one Order, and the inhabitants of one City...." — Bahá'u'lláh*

*"Close investigation will show that the primary cause of oppression and injustice, of unrighteousness, irregularity and disorder, is the people's lack of religious faith and the fact that they are uneducated." — 'Abdu'l-Bahá*

By 1973, for example, literacy among Bahá'í women under forty had reached nearly 100 percent, in contrast to a national literacy rate among women of less than 25 percent.

## Progressive principles

In their approach to education, Bahá'ís were at the forefront of educational advances that were occurring in Iran between the end of the nineteenth and start of the early 20th century.

The traditional educational system in Iran was based on teaching by local religious leaders (*mullahs*), who usually had no training in educational methods. They often taught in their own homes, focusing on memorization of the Qur'an and poetry, without any governmental oversight or adherence to professional standards. These local schools were known as *mukhtabs*.

At the secondary level was the *madrasah*, the religious college, which likewise focused on Qur'anic education, although astronomy, medicine and mathematics were taught at a few using medieval texts and traditional methods.

"During the second half of the nineteenth century there were increasing calls among Iranian intellectuals, who were concerned about the fact that Iran was so far behind Europe, for the establishment of modern educational facilities in Iran," said Bahá'í scholar Moojan Momen.

Accordingly, a number of "modern" schools were established in Tehran, Tabriz, Rasht, Mashhad, and Bushihr at the turn of the century. Some, however, were soon closed in the face of conservative opposition.

Schools for girls faced even stronger opposition, with clerics at one point issuing a fatwa stating that girls' schools were contrary to the principles of Shia Islam. An attempt to found a school in 1903 lasted only four days, another school founded in 1907 was similarly forced to close.

Bahá'ís, inspired by the progressive principles of their Faith, sought to break away from traditional Islamic education in their approach to teaching methods and curriculum. Both

Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged the study of modern sciences and arts, which were not part of a traditional education. Bahá'ís were also keen to establish schools where the emphasis on moral education in Bahá'í scriptures could be adequately realized. The importance of providing education to girls was another incentive for the founding of Bahá'í schools.

In addition, Bahá'ís were motivated to establish their own schools because Bahá'í children were sometimes prevented from attending local *maktabs*.

The earliest effort to establish a Bahá'í school appears to have been in the village of Mahfuru-zak in Mazandaran, probably in the late 1870s, according to Dr. Momen. There a local religious leader, Mullah Ali, had become a Bahá'í, along with most of the rest of the populace.

Inspired by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh on education, Mullah Ali and his wife, 'Alaviyyih Khanum, founded both a boys' school and a girls' school in the village. In 1882, however, Mullah Ali was denounced by neighboring religious leaders, arrested, taken to Tehran and executed.

The Tarbiyat School for Boys in Tehran, founded about 1899, was the first modern Bahá'í school in Iran and it soon became known as one of the best schools in the country. In 1905, it was the only school in Tehran where mathematics was studied every day and students were separated by ability.

Apart from the American School, it was also the only school to offer English language classes in addition to government-prescribed classes in Persian, Arabic and French. Despite the strong prejudice against the Faith in Iran, numerous prominent people sent their children to the Tarbiyat School.

## Schools for Girls

The Tarbiyat School for Girls, established in 1911, was likewise a leader in educational innovation at the time. It offered gymnastics and recess to girls more than 15 years before government schools

*“The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward. The principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance.*

*Today the mass of the people are uninformed even as to ordinary affairs, how much less do they grasp the core of the important problems and complex needs of the time.” — ‘Abdu'l-Bahá*

*“...knowledge is the cause of human progress.” — ‘Abdu'l-Bahá*

*“To promote knowledge is thus an inescapable duty imposed on every one of the friends of God.” — ‘Abdu'l-Bahá*

*“The education and training of children is among the most meritorious acts of humankind and draweth down the grace and favor of the All-Merciful, for education is the indispensable foundation of all human excellence and alloweth man to work his way to the heights of abiding glory. If a child be trained from his infancy, he will, through the loving care of the Holy Gardener, drink in the crystal waters of the spirit and of knowledge, like a young tree amid the rilling brooks. And certainly he will gather to himself the bright rays of the Sun of Truth, and through its light and heat will grow ever fresh and fair in the garden of life.” — ‘Abdu'l-Bahá*



allowed physical education for girls.

The success of the Tarbiyat School for Girls inspired other Bahá'í communities around the country to found girls' schools. By the time the government forced most Bahá'í schools to close in 1934, at least 25 schools for girls had been established by Bahá'ís.

Over time, the progress achieved by Bahá'í women was remarkable. At a time when the women's world was confined to the home, the Bahá'í writings encouraged women to direct their minds to science, industry, and subjects that would improve the human condition. Bahá'í schools for girls were, accordingly, a radical departure from the standards of the society at large. In some places, girl students had to be escorted to and from home, because girls were not permitted in public by themselves.

Indeed, the Bahá'í community faced formidable obstacles in every way in establishing their schools. Since its founding in 1844 in Iran, the Bahá'í Faith had faced periodic episodes of persecution. In the mid-1800s, more than 20,000 early Bahá'ís were killed.

"In many places, after fifty years of hiding and keeping a low profile following the Bábí persecutions, the establishment of a Bahá'í school was the first occasion that the Bahá'í stepped into the public arena," said Dr. Momen. "The schools thus became the visible sign of the existence of a Bahá'í community in each locality and therefore often bore the brunt of the ignorance and prejudices of the masses of Iranians, who had grown up fearing and hating the 'Bábís' for no particular reason other than that this was what they were taught by their religious leaders and elders. Opposition to the Bahá'í schools was also encountered from local Islamic religious leaders, who would stir up the masses against these schools, and from local officials, who would refuse the necessary permissions and certifications."

The Bahá'ís took whatever steps they could to

mitigate the opposition. For example, no classes on the Bahá'í Faith were taught in the schools, and Bahá'í pupils would have a separate religious class, outside of school, on Friday. The schools were also careful to follow all government decrees on the curriculum, including giving classes in Arabic, the Qur'an and Islam.

Despite these measures, opposition to and attacks on the schools occurred. In Sangsar in 1921, for example, a mob incited by the local Islamic religious leaders burst into the school and burnt it down. In 1913 in Abadih, where a girls' school was established in 1908, newly appointed provincial governor ordered the school closed in response to complaints from local religious leaders. The governor told the Bahá'ís: "We have not even been able to establish a girls' school in Shiraz. To do this in Abadih is premature." The pupils of almost all of Bahá'í schools faced a certain degree of harassment on their way to and from school.

In spite of these obstacles, the network of Bahá'í schools in Iran grew in number and each school grew in size. Initially most of these schools were primary schools but in later years, secondary grades were added to those in the cities. The Vahdat Bashar School in Kashan, for example started as a primary school in 1909 with six primary grades; a secondary grade was added in 1913-14. By 1910, the Tarbiyat School in Tehran had some 270 pupils, and it offered advanced courses in history, physics, chemistry, and botany, in addition to Persian, Arabic and English.

By 1933, just before they were closed by the government, there were at least 47 primary schools operated by Bahá'ís in Iran, of which at least eight also had secondary level classes. By one scholar's count, these schools had a combined enrollment of more than 4,700 students. They had been established in virtually every region of Iran, including in the cities of Tehran, Mashhad, Yazd, Qazvin, Kashan, Hamadan, and Samsan.

## CHAPTER IV

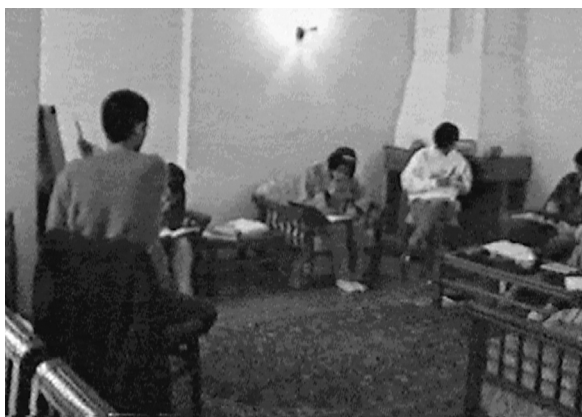
# The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education

**I**N WHAT THE *New York Times* called “an elaborate act of communal self-preservation,” the Bahá'í community in 1987 established its own higher education program to meet the educational needs of young people who had been systematically denied access to higher education by the Iranian government.

Over the years, the program evolved into a full-fledged university, known as the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE).

By mid-1998, the Institute had an enrollment of some 900 students, a faculty of more than 150 first-rate academics and instructors, and complete course offerings in ten subject areas. It operated largely by correspondence, with small classes in private homes, but also had a small “infrastructure” composed of various classrooms, laboratories and libraries scattered throughout Iran. Yet its offerings were so well regarded that a handful of early graduates had managed to win admission to top-flight graduate schools overseas.

*Most of the classes of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education were held in private homes, like this one, which shows a professor at an easel with his back to the camera.*



Then, in 1998, agents of the Iranian government staged a series of sweeping raids in late September and early October, arresting at least 36 members of the BIHE's faculty and staff and confiscating much of its equipment and records, which were located in over 500 homes. Those who were arrested, many of whom have now been released, were asked to sign a document declaring that BIHE had ceased to exist and that they would no longer cooperate with it. The detainees refused to sign any such declaration.

Indeed, the Bahá'í community's efforts to provide its young people with a higher education have continued — as have the government's attempts to shut down those efforts.

Early in 2001, three classrooms used by members of the community were seized in another strike against the Bahá'ís' right to education. In 2002, one of the instructors who was teaching Bahá'í youth in the city of Qaim-Shahr was

*continued on page 23*

*The BIHE relied heavily on the use of extensive photocopying, and one of the biggest blows in the 1998 raids was the confiscation of several large photocopying units.*





## The Bahá'í community of Iran Speaks

**I**N NOVEMBER 2004, the Bahá'í community of Iran addressed a letter to Iranian President Moham-med Khatami, addressing specifically the government's duplicity in offering university enrollment to Bahá'í youth but then falsely recording them as Muslims, effectively excluding them from higher education. The letter also examines the nature of the persecution the Bahá'ís in Iran have faced for more than 25 years, suggesting that not only does international law condemn such oppression, but so does the Qur'an and Islamic law. Here follow excerpts from the letter:

15 November 2004

The Esteemed Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran Mr. Khatami

For more than 161 years, the Bahá'ís have been exposed, in the sacred land of Iran — the native soil of their forefathers in whose name they take pride — to a series of abuses, tortures, murders and mas-sacres and have tolerated numerous forms of persecution, tragedy and deprivation, for no other reason than believing in God and following their Faith, the largest religious minority in Iran. Contrary to all religious, legal and moral standards, and supported by existing official documentation, they have been, individually and collectively, the subject of unwarranted discrimination and various injustices.

Day after day, the pressure against this wronged community became more intense and the scope of the injustice and infringement of their rights in various aspects of their lives more overt, such that their possessions, their homes, their jobs and their very existence were the target of attacks.

From the perspective of the holy religion of Islam, people are free to choose and follow their own religion, and no one has the right to impose his religion on another. The following noble verses “Let there be no compulsion in religion...” and “To you be your Way, and to me mine” confirm this point. From the perspective of the holy religion of Islam, no one has the right to attack and violate the prop-erties, the life and the dignity of those who live under the banner of this religion, which is to be secure and protected: “...if anyone slew a person—unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land—it would be as if he slew the whole people...”

The equality, the freedom and the inalienable rights of all members of the human family, without discrimination as to race, gender, language and religion, have been unequivocally specified in all inter-national covenants, especially in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Under the rubric of Cultural Revolution, the authorities of the [Ministry of] Culture and Educa-tion decided to expel Bahá'í students, some of whom were completing their last term, from universi-ties and other institutions of higher learning in which they were studying. Others were barred from entering these institutions solely because of their adherence to the Bahá'í Faith. Then in 1369 [1990/91], the Council of Cultural Revolution, with reference to a well-planned agenda, openly deprived Bahá'í youth from higher education, thereby denying a number of the youth of this land the opportunity to realize their potential. This situation continued for some 20 years until in Adhar of 1382 [December of 2003] “Peykesanjesh” (the publication of the Ministry of Science) officially announced that for the first time the religious affiliation of applicants would not be included in the application for the [university] national examination, and, instead, applicants would be asked to choose the subject of religious studies in which they would wish to be examined. Owing to the limitation cited in Article 13 of the Constitu-tion, Bahá'í applicants necessarily chose Islamic studies for this examination.

Having received their entrance identification cards and subsequently taking this national examination,

the success of Bahá'í youth, based on the government announcement of results in the first phase, was significant in that some 800 students were qualified to choose their fields of study, of whom hundreds ranked in the one to four digit range [a ranking scale extending to 200,000]. After receiving their test result forms, however, the Bahá'í applicants were surprised to see that their religion was specified as Islam. This duplicity astounded the Bahá'í community. Alas, the joyful news that the question about the religion of the applicants had been omitted from the national university entrance examination, which was a reflection of freedom of belief and a sign that the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran was moving toward establishing the foundation of human rights and eliminating discrimination in education, was quite short-lived.

The Bahá'í students whose successful passing of the entrance examination was announced in the first phase refused to select their fields of study and attend university because compliance with [the false information on their religious affiliation] in their test result forms would be tantamount to recanting their Faith. Instead, following the procedure practiced in the Bahá'í community, they chose to send letters of protest appealing to relevant authorities. Having received these letters, [authorities from the] Education Measurement and Evaluation Organization (EMEO) telephoned a handful of the students informing them that their appeals had been considered, and the reference to religion had been removed from their test result forms. The authorities asked them to inform other Bahá'í students of the action taken, summoning them to the office of the EMEO in order that their test result forms be corrected and their fields of study chosen. Another glimmer of hope was thus kindled in the hearts of the Bahá'í youth, who immediately proceeded to meet with the authorities in order to choose their fields of study. Again, with great regret, it was discovered that in the announcement to declare successful candidates, only a small handful of Bahá'í applicants had been accepted in the field of English language, an action which seemed to have been taken as a deliberate ploy to appease the international community, whereas ample and indisputable documentation exists that reveals that most of the Bahá'í applicants, who had been recognized to have successfully passed the National Entrance Examination, should have been accepted to enter universities in Iran.

Questions continue to preoccupy the minds of the members of the Bahá'í community in Iran and throughout the world as well as free thinkers and advocates of human rights: Does such unfair decision-making, such resorting to strategies whose direction is obvious and whose aim is to create prejudice and to violate the indisputable rights of a community, conform to standards of justice and equity? Should those who seek progress be barred from acquiring knowledge and deprived of actualizing their God-given potentialities because of their religious belief?

By now, a quarter of a century has elapsed in the reign of the Islamic government. To every act of injustice, Bahá'ís have responded with magnanimity. Faced with widespread and intense persecutions and multi-faceted iniquities, the Bahá'ís have never deviated, even by a hair's breadth, from the straight divine path, and they continue to hold fast onto the cord of patience and tolerance as dictated by their Faith and belief.

It is now hoped that [that respected authority], based on the Constitution, will take immediate action to ensure the emancipation of the Iranian Bahá'í community, reinstating their human rights and restoring the privileges of which they have been deprived.

Respectfully,  
The Iranian Bahá'í community

## BIHE STUDENT PROFILE #1:

### Dreams of Going to University

GROWING UP IN Tehran, *Hamid* knew that — like almost everywhere else in the world — the key to a good job is a university diploma. But because he is a Bahá'í, he knew he had little chance of getting into college.

“It made all of us Bahá'í youth very sad about the future,” said Hamid, which is not his real name. “In Iran, if you don’t have a university degree, it is very difficult to get a job.”

Now 32 years old and attending graduate school outside of Iran, Hamid had already been denied schooling once for being a Bahá'í. That was in 1984, when, as an 11-year-old in middle school, he was expelled along with most other Bahá'í children in Iran.

“For several months, I had to study at home,” he said. “My family helped me, but it was really tough for an 11-year-old child to study alone.”

An international outcry soon forced the government to re-enroll primary and secondary school children. But the government has continued to prevent Iranian Bahá'í youth from attending university.

“When I was in high school, I saw the other students studying and preparing to take the university entrance examination,” he said. “But I knew I had no hope of getting in.”

He tried submitting the forms to take the exams anyway. But in Iran, those forms require that prospective students put a mark to denote their religion. And there are only four possible religions to choose from: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism.

“Since I didn’t belong to any of those denominations, I didn’t mark anything,” said Hamid, noting that there was, of course, no place for the Bahá'í Faith. “I was told I could not be given an entrance card to the exam.”

That was in 1992. He tried other years, also, to get into university. But to no avail.

Eventually, he enrolled at the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), which at the time was little more than a correspondence school course for Bahá'ís, run by Bahá'ís. [See page 19]

“In the BIHE, you have to study by yourself. It is kind of like studying in prison alone. You have no friends, no teachers, nobody to take your questions.”

*Many nights I dreamed I was  
allowed to get into the university,  
but in the morning I woke up and it  
was only a dream.*

Because he also had to work to help support himself, it took six years to finish his studies.

“Many nights I dreamed I was allowed to get into the university, but in the morning I woke up and it was only a dream,” he said.

Eventually, in 2003, Hamid graduated from the BIHE with a degree in engineering. By that time, the Institute had achieved considerable distinction, and Hamid left Iran to enter graduate school in another country.

He hopes, however, to go back to Iran after he has completed his graduate studies. “Iran is my country. And I wish for the day that the government of Iran will understand that Bahá'ís want nothing but the progress and prosperity of Iran. And I want to go back and help the progress of my country.”

summoned to the Intelligence agency. He was ordered to identify himself and bring, for submission to the authorities, all of his booklets and textbooks.

On 19 July 2002, as the Institute was holding qualifying examinations across the country, Iranian Revolutionary Guards entered three sites in the city of Shiraz, where they videotaped the proceedings, interviewed several students, and confiscated 25 examination papers. In Mashhad, on the same day, the Guards entered all five of the district examinations and confiscated all of the examination papers, along with Bahá'í books.

"The goal of the government of Iran is to discontinue the [Bahá'í] University and silence this educational and spiritual movement," said one Bahá'í who was closely involved in the University's operation and did not wish to be named after the 1998 raids. "They claim that a Bahá'í has no right to develop and must not have higher education, so that the community may become degraded."

### **Creative, non-violent response**

The establishment of the BIHE stands as a remarkably creative — and entirely non-violent — response to the on-going effort of the Iranian government to deprive Iranian Bahá'í youth of access to higher education.

Until the government raids at the end of September 1998, the Institute offered Bachelor's degrees in ten subject areas: applied chemistry, biology, dental science, pharmacological science, civil engineering, computer science, psychology, law, literature and accounting. And within these subject areas, which were administered by five university "departments," the Institute was able to offer more than 200 distinct courses each term. In the beginning, courses were based on correspondence lessons developed by Indiana University, which was one of the first institutions in the West to recognize the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education. Later on, course offerings were developed internally.

The teaching was done principally via correspondence, or, for specialized scientific and technical courses and in other special cases, in small-group classes that were usually held in private homes.

"At the beginning, the students did not even know the names of their professors," said one BIHE professor shortly after the 1998 raids. "Even after three or four years, the students did not know the names of their professors. They had never seen them. Because it was very dangerous. If somebody knows the name of them, maybe they would tell their friends. So it was all correspondence at the beginning of this plan."

Over time, however, the Institute was able to establish a few laboratories, operated in privately owned commercial buildings in and around Tehran, for computer science, physics, dental science, pharmacology, applied chemistry and language study. The operations of these laboratories were kept prudently quiet, with students cautioned not to come and go in large groups that might give the authorities a reason to object.

### **An all-volunteer, unpaid faculty**

At its peak, the Institute had more than 150 faculty members. Approximately 25 or 30 were professors who were fired from government-run universities after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Other faculty members included doctors, dentists, lawyers and engineers who gave of their time to teach students. The majority were educated in Iran, but a good number have degrees from universities in the West including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Columbia University, the University of California at Berkeley and the Sorbonne. None of the Bahá'í faculty members were paid for their time; all gave it freely as a form of community service.

"These youth are very precious people," said a faculty member, explaining why they were willing to take such risks, without monetary remuneration, to establish the Institute. "We all care about

*continued on page 26*

## BIHE STUDENT PROFILE #2:

### Working Outside the Box

**W**HEN CONFRONTED BY four boxes — one for each of the major religions in Iran, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism — on university entrance forms, *Parviz* took a distinctively creative route.

“I just drew another box, added the word ‘Bahá’í,’ and checked it,” said *Parviz*, which is not his real name.

The tactic failed to impress government

*When confronted by four boxes — one for each of the major religions in Iran, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism — on university entrance forms, Parviz took a distinctively creative route. “I just drew another box, added the word ‘Bahá’í,’ and checked it,” said Parviz.*

authorities, who had since the early 1980s blocked Bahá’í youth from higher education.

“They wrote back saying that the application was incomplete,” said *Parviz*, who is now out of Iran and studying in another country. “So I went to the testing office in the Ministry of Education, along with another Bahá’í friend.

“And I asked ‘What is wrong with my application.’ And the guy sitting there just looked up and said, ‘I think you know what is the problem.’ And we tried to talk about it with him. But

finally he said ‘Either leave or I will call security.’”

His rejection was, of course, entirely expected. Thousands of Bahá’í young people have been denied access to higher education in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

“I wasn’t shocked to be rejected” said *Parviz*. “But it was still a disappointment because each time you apply, you hope something might change.”

*Parviz* eventually managed to get a college education by enrolling at the Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), a Bahá’í-run institution founded in 1987 to provide university-level education for Bahá’í youth on a correspondence-school basis. [See page 19]

“I knew all about the BIHE. It has its own exam, and I took that pretty much the same time as the national exam. And I got accepted and started. That was in 1990.”

Four-and-a-half years later, he graduated with a degree in civil engineering.

*Parviz* eventually found some work as a civil engineer, even though he could not obtain a license as a Bahá’í and a graduate of the BIHE.

“You don’t have to have a license in Iran. You do all the work and then have someone with an engineering license sign it for you for a fee. It is quite a common practice.”

Eventually, *Parviz* realized that to advance, and to pursue his goal of teaching, he needed a graduate degree. “I couldn’t go to graduate school in Iran, of course, so I left the country so that I could attend school outside,” said *Parviz*. At the time of this writing, he was pursuing a PhD at a noted Western university.



### BIHE STUDENT PROFILE #3:

## “We are still alive”

**I**N ORDER TO stay in high school, *Miriam* had to sign a statement vowing that she would not tell anyone in her school that she was a Bahá'í.

“By law we could attend high school, but in many cities, including in Tehran, Isfahan, Yazd and the others that are more influenced by the Muslim clerics, many Bahá'í students had problems nevertheless,” said Miriam, which is not her real name.

“In my case, after they found out I was a Bahá'í, the only condition they would accept me in high school was to sign a form, that no one in the school, including students and teachers, would find out that I was a Bahá'í.

“If anyone found out about my religion, then I would be expelled,” she said.

When it came time to apply for college, however, Mariam knew there was little or no chance for her to attend, even if she was willing to keep her beliefs to herself.

Entry forms for university in Iran in 1989 required a declaration of religion, and the Bahá'í Faith was not one of the four options. And since religious principle forbids Bahá'ís from lying if asked about their beliefs, no Bahá'í youth were being allowed into universities — a situation that prevails today.

Like other Bahá'í youth, her only option was to attend the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), a Bahá'í-run institution founded in 1987 to provide university-level education for Bahá'í youth on a correspondence-school basis. [See page 19]

Miriam was not happy about this. “I wanted to go to medical school, and it was clear that I couldn't do it through correspondence schools that had just been formed the previous year,” she

*In my case, after they found out I was a Bahá'í, the only condition they would accept me in high school was to sign a form, that no one in the school, including students and teachers, would find out that I was a Bahá'í.*

said. “There would be no chance of being able to work at a hospital and get the experience I would need as a medical student.”

The BIHE was, nevertheless, her only option for obtaining higher education. And instead of studying medicine, she choose psychology.

“At the beginning, I was not invested in it. I was dragging my feet. But we had no other choice. So then I started doing it and disciplining myself.”

Eventually, Miriam was able to leave Iran. Her BIHE was recognized by a major North American university, where she entered a master's program in a field related to psychology.

“At the time, everyone told me that if I wanted to become a doctor, it was still not too late. They said, ‘You are 25 years old, why don't you start?’ But mentally, I didn't want to do medicine anymore. My BIHE degree in psychology just meant so much to me.

“It was my way of saying to the Iranian government that ‘I am a Bahá'í and I am proud and I don't care if you want to try to destroy us. We are still alive.’ And I needed to do something with my degree. I wanted to prove that we hadn't done this for nothing.”

them. They have been through tests and trials and they had no hope. They have been deprived of many things so if there was any chance for us to get something better for them, we did it.”

Each of the five departments drew not only on these volunteer professors for their academic expertise but also on a small and anonymous group of Bahá’í academics in North America, Europe and Australia who sent in the latest textbooks and research papers, occasionally made visits to Iran as guest lecturers, and otherwise provided instructional and technical support.

## High academic standards

Entrance examinations for the BIHE were required, and they established high standards. Of the roughly 1,500 students who applied for admission in its first year of operation, 250 were accepted for the first semester of study. By 1996, a total of 600 students had enrolled in the Bahá’í Institute of Higher Education. By 1998, approximately 900 students were enrolled.

Among the indications of the Institute’s surprisingly high academic standards and instructional level was the success that a number of Institute graduates had in gaining admission to graduate schools outside Iran, including major universities in the United States and Canada. It should be added that some Institute graduates and students outside Iran have also had a difficult time getting their credits recognized — a fact of life for Institute graduates that stems directly from the Iranian government’s policy of blocking their access to education and its failure to recognize the Institute officially.

## Complex administration

As noted, the Institute functioned basically like a correspondence school. And even its early years were marked by a certain level of harassment. At

first, students and faculty sent homework assignments and lessons back and forth via the state-run postal system. But the packages often did not arrive and were assumed to have been intercepted as part of the government’s attempt to interfere with Bahá’í education. Later the Institute resorted to its own delivery service, making extensive use of young people on motorbikes.

Since professors could not deliver lectures openly, they prepared their own written notes and compiled text books for distribution to the students. Some of these texts were based on the latest Western research. One student in civil engineering, for example, was studying the construction of earthquake-proof earthen silos — and the Institute’s overseas contacts were able to get for him some of the latest research on this topic from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The entire operation relied heavily on the use of extensive photocopying, and one of the biggest blows in the 1998 raids was the confiscation of several large photocopying units.

The Institute system also featured a network of special depository libraries around the country. Numbering more than 45, these libraries existed in the private homes of Bahá’ís and enabled students in each district to obtain access to the necessary textbooks for the courses. Some of these libraries were also seized in the 1998 raids.

Before the raids, as Institute officials began to feel increasing confidence about their operation, they started to organize many group classes along with independent study in private homes. The Institute also began to publish sophisticated course catalogues, listing not only course offerings but the qualifications of the faculty members. Through the international network of Bahá’í communities worldwide, the Institute also began to establish the means by which its graduates might become fully recognized by other institutions of higher education outside Iran.

## Iran's Obligations under International Law

**T**HE IDEA THAT education is a fundamental human right was first specified in 1948, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The Declaration states, in Article 26:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

The Declaration also establishes the right to freedom of religion, and it declares that:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Iran was among the 48 member states of the United Nations in 1948 that unanimously adopted the Declaration. Iran also ratified two “covenants” on human rights, which essentially translate the rights spelled out in the Declaration into specific treaties, creating what is known as an “International Bill of Rights.”

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ratified by Iran on 3 January 1976, likewise restates each state’s obligation to uphold the right to education. In Article 13, the Covenant also specifically states that this right applies to access to higher education:

Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education;

Further, the International Covenant on Civil

*Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.*

and Political Rights, ratified by Iran on 23 March 1976, re-states the right to freedom of religion, codifying it as a firm obligation to be upheld by state parties to the Covenant. The Covenant states in Article 18:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

Although these documents were signed before the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, they remain in effect. Not only has Iran participated regularly in international reporting processes designed to uphold and reinforce these Covenants, it is a given that UN conventions remain binding on successive governments.

Yet, despite these and other obligations under international law, the government of Iran has persistently pursued its campaign of persecution against Iran’s Bahá’í community.

Fortunately, the international community has responded sympathetically to the persecution of the Bahá’ís in Iran, expressing concern for the

***The United Nations  
Commission on Human Rights has  
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expressing concern about reports of  
human rights violations in Iran,  
and each has made specific mention  
of the situation of the Bahá'í  
community there.***

Bahá'ís and condemnation of the Iranian government. The Bahá'í community believes that this outpouring has been a strong restraining force against the government, preventing deprivations on a much greater scale.

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has passed more than 20 resolutions expressing concern about human rights violations in Iran, and each has made specific mention of the situation of the Bahá'í community there.

Following the lead of the Commission on Human Rights, the United Nations General Assembly itself has since 1985 approved some 17 resolutions that have specifically mentioned the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran and expressed concern over human rights violations there.

Virtually all of these resolutions have called on Iran to stop violating the rights of Bahá'ís and to abide by the various international covenants on human rights that the government has freely signed. UN resolutions have also called explicitly for the “emancipation” of the Bahá'ís of Iran.

Among the most salient features of the United Nations' attention to the Bahá'í case has been the continuing investigations conducted by a succession of highly regarded human rights specialists. Each was appointed by the UN Commission on Human Rights and given the mandate to probe into the human rights situation in Iran. And each has reported extensively on the real and serious nature of the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran, lending unimpeachable credibility to the Bahá'í case.

In their various reports to the Commission on Human Rights, these “Special Representatives” have expressed concern over the Iranian government's efforts to deny Bahá'ís access to higher education.

In 2001, for example, Special Representative Maurice Copithorne noted that “the Bahá'í community continues to experience discrimination in the areas of, inter alia, education, employment, travel, housing and the enjoyment of cultural activities. Bahá'ís are still, in effect, prevented from participating in religious gatherings or educational activities.” He added that Bahá'ís also continue “to be denied access to higher education in legally recognized public institutions.”

More recently, in 2003, the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, Professor Abdelfattah Amor, a noted Tunisian legal expert, took note of the continuing confiscations, imprisonments, and efforts to block Bahá'í youth from receiving higher education, and concluded:

While noting some promised improvements in treatment of the Bahá'í minority, the Special Rapporteur is of the view that the measures taken by the Iranian authorities to end the persecution of Bahá'ís, including by non-State entities, and to guarantee them the same rights as any other Iranian citizen are still inadequate. He again reminds the Iranian authorities of the need to ensure respect for the relevant provisions of international law, including article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. In addition, as a religious minority, Bahá'ís are entitled to the respect due to all other religious minorities.



## The Historical Background to Bahá'í Persecutions in Iran

**T**HE PRESENT DAY status of human rights and social reform in the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be adequately understood without taking into account the historical background of persecution against the Bahá'í community — a history that does much to explain the cultural crisis gripping Iranian society today as its leadership struggles to face the challenge of modernity.

The Bahá'í Faith has been persecuted in Iran since its founding there in the mid-1800s. Early followers faced violent opposition from both the Islamic religious authorities and succeed-

*A Bahá'í father and son (at left) in chains after being arrested with fellow Bahá'ís, in a photograph taken around 1896. Both were subsequently executed.*

*The idea that there should be Messengers of God after Muhammad is viewed by many Muslims as heresy — and is one of the underlying theological reasons for the persecution of Bahá'ís.*

ing dynasties. It has been estimated that some 20,000 persons perished in these pogroms during the nineteenth century.

The persecutions continued intermittently in the twentieth century, coinciding most often with the need of the government to shore up support with certain elements of Iran's Islamic







*Muna  
Mahmudnizhad*



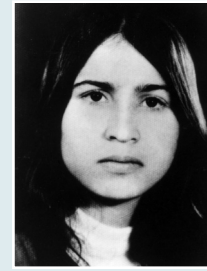
*Mabshid  
Nirumand*



*Simin  
Sabiri*



*Zarrin  
Muqimi-Abyanib*



*Akhtar  
Thabit*

## Hanged for Teaching “Sunday School”

**F**EW INCIDENTS ARE more shocking — or revealing of the religious basis of the persecution against Bahá’ís and the courage with which they faced it — than the group hanging of ten Bahá’í women in Shiraz on 18 June 1983.

Their crime: teaching religious classes to Bahá’í youth — the equivalent of being “Sunday school” teachers in the West.

Ranging in age from 17 to 57, the ten Bahá’í women were led to the gallows in succession. Authorities apparently hoped that as each saw the others slowly strangle to death, they would renounce their own faith.

But according to eyewitness reports, the women went to their fate singing and chanting, as though they were enjoying a pleasant outing.

One of the men attending the gallows confided to a Bahá’í: “We tried saving their lives up to the last moment, but one by one, first the older ladies, then the young girls, were hanged while the others were forced to watch, it being hoped that this might induce them to recant their belief. We even urged them to say they were not Bahá’ís, but not one of them agreed; they preferred the execution.”

All of the women had been interrogated and tortured in the months leading up to their execution. Indeed, some had wounds still visible on their bodies as they lay in the morgue after their execution.

The youngest of these martyrs was Muna Mahmudnizhad, a 17-year-old schoolgirl who because of her youth and conspicuous innocence became, in a sense, a symbol of the group. In prison, she was lashed on the soles of her feet with a cable and forced to walk on bleeding feet.

leadership. And they have come regardless of the leaders’ political orientation.

Some of the outbreaks against Bahá’ís were directed by local or regional authorities. In 1903, for example, 101 Bahá’ís were killed in the city of Yazd after the populace was incited by hostile mullahs. At other times the oppression of Bahá’ís

was made a part of official national policy. During the early years of the Pahlavi Regime (1927 to 1979), the government formalized a policy of discrimination against the Bahá’ís as a concession to the clergy. Beginning in 1933, Bahá’í literature was banned, Bahá’í marriages were not recognized, and Bahá’ís in public service were



*Shahin (Shirin)  
Dalvand*



*Ruya  
Ishraqi*



*Izzat Ishraqi  
(Janami)*



*Tabirih  
Siyavushi*



*Nusrat  
Yalda'i*

Yet she never waived in her faith, even to the point of kissing the hands of her executioner, and then the rope, before putting it around her own throat.

Another young woman, Zarrin Muqimi-Abyanih, 28, told the interrogators whose

***“Whether you accept it or not,  
I am a Bahá’í. You cannot take  
it away from me. I am a Bahá’í  
with my whole being and my  
whole heart.”***

chief goal was to have her disavow her faith: “Whether you accept it or not, I am a Bahá’í. You cannot take it away from me. I am a Bahá’í with my whole being and my whole heart.”

During the trial of another of the

women, Ruya Ishraqi, a 23-year-old veterinary student, the judge said: “You put yourselves through this agony only for one word: just say you are not a Bahá’í and I’ll see that...you are released...” Miss Ishraqi responded: “I will not exchange my faith for the whole world.”

The other women hanged on 18 June 1983 were Shahin Dalvand, 25, a sociologist; Izzat Janami Ishraqi, 57, a homemaker; Mahshid Nirumand, 28, who had qualified for a degree in physics but had it denied her because she was a Bahá’í; Simin Sabiri, 25; Tahirih Arjumandi Siyavushi, 30, a nurse; Akhtar Thabit, 25, also a nurse; Nusrat Ghufrani Yalda’i, 47, a mother and member of the local Bahá’í Spiritual Assembly.

All had seen it as their duty to teach Bahá’í religious classes — especially since the government had barred Bahá’í children from attending regular school.

demoted or fired. Eventually, Bahá’í schools were closed.

Another round of persecutions commenced in 1955, when the Pahlavi regime allowed the nationwide broadcast of a series of incendiary sermons against the Bahá’ís by a leading Shia preacher in Tehran — apparently hoping to make the Bahá’ís

a scapegoat to deflect attention from unpopular government policies. Both the national and army radio stations were put at the disposal of the responsible cleric, Sheikh Muhammad Taqi Falsafi, who joined the Shah’s Minister of Defense, General Batmangelich, in demolishing the dome of Bahá’í national headquarters with pickaxes. A

wave of anti-Bahá'í violence swept the country. Murders, rapes and robberies were reported in many areas, while the government assured the Majlis that it had ordered the suppression of all activities of "the Bahá'í sect."

Bahá'ís understand that this pattern of persecution is a manifestation of the misunderstanding and fear that often occur when a new religion emerges from the matrix of a well-established orthodoxy. The pattern has been repeated through the ages; virtually all of the world's great religions have faced intense persecution at their birth.

In the case of the Bahá'í Faith, the teachings of its two Founders, especially when viewed through the lens of traditional Islam, are as challenging to the religious orthodoxy as those of any Prophet in ancient times.

The initial wave of persecution came in response to the claims of a young Iranian

merchant, known to history as the Báb, who announced in Shiraz in May 1844 that He was the bearer of a new revelation from God. His primary mission, the Báb said, was to prepare humanity for the advent of "Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest," the universal divine Messenger anticipated in the scriptures of all the major religions.

The teachings of the Báb called for the spiritual and moral reformation of Persian society, and for the upliftment of the station of women and the poor. His promotion of education and the useful sciences was also revolutionary. Such progressive and idealistic teachings, which made a clear break with the Islamic frame of reference, were rapidly embraced by thousands of followers and were seen by both secular and religious authorities as a threat to their power. Widespread persecutions followed, and, as noted above, several thousand followers, who were known as

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







*Destruction of the National Bahá'í Center in Tehran, Iran, circa 1955.*

Bábís, paid with their lives. The Báb Himself was executed by the government in 1850.

Among the followers of the Báb was an Iranian nobleman named Bahá'u'lláh. In 1863 He announced that He was the Messenger the Báb had heralded, founding the Bahá'í Faith. The central theme of Bahá'u'lláh's message is that humanity is a single race and that the day has come for unification into one global society. "The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens," wrote Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh taught that there is only one God, and that all of the world's religions are expressions of a single, unfolding divine plan, "the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future."

Bahá'ís believe that God progressively reveals religious truth to humanity through a series of divine Messengers, each of Whom has founded a great religion. These Messengers have included Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha,

Jesus and Muhammad; the most recent are the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Others will follow in ages to come.

The idea that there should be Messengers of God after Muhammad is viewed by many Muslims as heresy. In the Qur'an, Muhammad referred to Himself as the "Seal of the Prophets," and most Muslim scholars interpret this to mean that He would be the last Messenger of God.

Bahá'ís, however, believe that the coming of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh poses no contradiction to Islamic teachings or those of any of the other revealed religions. Bahá'ís understand that Muhammad ended or "sealed" the prophetic cycle. Then, with the advent of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, a new era of religious fulfillment began. Bahá'u'lláh referred to this new period in human history as the "stage of maturity." Bahá'ís believe that this is all in accordance with the prophecies of Islam and the world's other major religions.

***The persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran is not related to any underlying issue of ethnicity or political agenda. Only their religious beliefs distinguish them from their fellow countrymen — beliefs which the Bahá'í teachings forbid them from imposing on others.***

Other aspects of the Bahá'í teachings also arouse opposition among some followers of Islam. In outlining His vision for a new world civilization, Bahá'u'lláh advocated a series of highly progressive social principles. These include the elimination of all forms of prejudice; equality between the sexes; recognition of the essential oneness of the world's great religions; the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth; universal education; the harmony of science and religion; a sustainable balance between human society and the natural world; and the establishment of a world federal system, based on collective security and the oneness of humanity.

Some fundamentalist Muslims view the progressive nature of these teachings, such as the equality of women and the absence of religious clergy, as especially antithetical to the traditions

of Islam. To Iran's Shia establishment, especially — indeed to many among their Sunni Muslim counterparts — the emergence of an independent religion that postdates the Qur'an by almost thirteen centuries is not only theologically abhorrent but threatens the system of patronage, endowments, political influence, and social perquisites to which they lay claim. The effect has been to arouse in the Shia establishment a determination to extinguish the new faith and suppress its followers.

The persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran is not related to any underlying issue of ethnicity or political agenda. The overwhelming majority of Iranian Bahá'ís come from the same diverse ethnic stocks as the rest of the population, and they represent a cross section of Iran's social classes.

Only their religious beliefs distinguish them from their fellow countrymen — beliefs which the Bahá'í teachings forbid them from imposing on others. Paradoxically, because of the control exercised by the Islamic clergy over the communications media, the nature of Bahá'í beliefs remains virtually unknown to a public that has been systematically taught to fear and hate them.

The Iranian Bahá'í community has itself consistently been denied the use of any means of mass communication, including radio, television, newspapers, films, the distribution of literature and public lectures. The result has been widespread, unreasoning prejudice.



## Bahá'í Persecutions Beyond Education

SINCE THE ESTABLISHMENT of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the government of Iran has waged a systematic campaign of persecution and oppression aimed at the Bahá'í community of Iran. Its reaches have extended far beyond exclusion from education.

This campaign, which has been based solely on religious prejudice and can be seen as nothing less than an attempt to eradicate the Bahá'í community from Iranian life, began with a series of measures that directly threatened the lives, freedom, and economic livelihood of Iran's Bahá'í community.

Between 1979 and 1998, more than 200 Bahá'ís were killed or executed, hundreds more were wrongfully imprisoned, and thousands were fired from government jobs, had businesses closed, and were denied pensions. Bahá'í holy places were destroyed, cemeteries were razed, and the freedom of Bahá'ís to assemble, choose their leadership, and worship as they chose was abrogated.

Even before the Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile to assume power in February of that

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year, an increase in attacks on Bahá'ís presaged the wholesale persecution that was to come. In 1978 at least seven Bahá'ís were killed, most as a result of mob violence.

When the Republic's new constitution was drawn up in April 1979, certain rights of the Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian minorities in Iran were specifically mentioned and protected. However, no mention whatsoever was made of the rights of the Bahá'í community, Iran's largest religious minority.



*After the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian government sought to destroy the Bahá'í leadership. In August 1980, the entire membership of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran, shown here, “disappeared.” All are presumed to have been killed.*

Under Iran's concept of an Islamic government, this exclusion has come to mean that Bahá'ís enjoy no rights of any sort, and that they can be attacked and persecuted with impunity. Courts in the Republic have denied Bahá'ís the right of redress or protection against assault, killings or other forms of persecution — and have ruled that Iranian citizens who kill or injure Bahá'ís are not liable for damages because their victims are “unprotected infidels.”

Without any claim to civil rights, the Bahá'í community saw rapid deterioration of its position within Iranian society. In March 1979, the House of the Báb, the holiest Bahá'í shrine in Iran, was turned over by the government to a Muslim cleric known for his anti-Bahá'í activities. In September, the House was destroyed by a mob led by mullahs and officials of the Department of Religious Affairs.

A November 1979 edict from the Ministry of Education required not only the dismissal of all Bahá'í teachers, but also held them responsible for the repayment of all salaries they had previously received.

At least seven Bahá'ís were killed in 1979. Two were executed by the government and one was hanged in prison. Others were beaten to death or killed in local incidents.

In 1980 at least 24 Bahá'ís were killed in Iran; 20 were executed by the government and the rest were stoned, assassinated or burned to death. In 1981, 48 Bahá'ís were killed or executed.

Significantly, the government targeted the members of elected Bahá'í leadership councils for execution or assassination during this period. Nearly half of the 200 Bahá'ís executed in Iran since 1979 have been members of national and local governing councils of the Bahá'í community, known as Spiritual Assemblies.

Executions continued apace through 1982, 1983 and 1984. At least 32 Bahá'ís were executed or killed in 1982, 29 were executed or killed in 1983, and 30 were executed or killed in 1984. And, again, the targets of these executions were often members of Bahá'í governing councils.

***The torture of Bahá'ís in Iranian prisons — and particularly of those who had been members of Bahá'í governing councils — was routine and systematic. Again, according to Bahá'ís who survived, the purpose of the torture almost invariably was to make the Bahá'ís recant their Faith or confess to some treasonous activity.***

Four members of the National Spiritual Assembly, which had once again been courageously re-established through fresh elections, were executed in 1984, although by then the institution had been disbanded in accordance with a government decree and the individuals held no official position in the Bahá'í community.

One of the most dramatic groups of executions came in June 1983, when ten Iranian Bahá'í women, including two teen-age girls, were hanged. The primary charge against them: teaching Bahá'í children's classes. [See “Hanged for teaching ‘Sunday School’” page 30]

The women were subjected to intense physical and mental abuse in an effort to coerce them to recant their Faith — an option that was almost always pressed upon Bahá'í prisoners. Yet, like nearly all Bahá'ís who have been arrested in Iran, they refused to deny their beliefs. Nevertheless, the fact that so many Bahá'ís were given the option of recanting, with the promise of release if they did so, is among the strongest proofs that the persecutions were based solely on religious beliefs.

## **Imprisonment and Torture**

Since 1979, nearly 1,000 Bahá'ís have been arrested and imprisoned. At one point in 1986, some 747 Bahá'ís were being held in prisons throughout



*A woman from Kata, murdered by a mob in 1979, shown with her two younger sisters.*

Iran. In most cases, they had no trials.

The torture of Bahá'ís in Iranian prisons — and particularly of those who had been members of Bahá'í governing councils — was routine and systematic. Again, according to Bahá'ís who survived, the purpose of the torture almost invariably was to make the Bahá'ís recant their Faith or confess to some treasonous activity.

Torture included sustained beating and flogging, the bastinado (whipping the soles of the feet), the pulling out of fingernails and teeth, and the deprivation of food and water for days at a time.

Bahá'ís were also subjected to psychological torture, including mock executions and being forced to witness the torture of family members and friends.

Thus an elderly Bahá'í woman, who was a member of a local Bahá'í council, was tortured in front of a dozen other Bahá'ís in an effort to persuade her and them to deny their Faith. The woman's jailer took her by her hair and continually banged her head against the wall. She was beaten about the head for a long time, until her body was covered with blood. After two years of imprisonment, she was summarily released, with no recourse against the abuse she had received.

At least 13 Bahá'ís who died in prison are believed to have been tortured to death. In these

cases, the bodies were buried by the authorities before the families could view them.

## Social and Economic Intimidation

In addition to killings and imprisonment, the authorities have also conducted a campaign of economic, social and cultural intimidation against the Bahá'í community of Iran. The objective, it is clear, has been to deprive Bahá'ís of their rights to education, to jobs and to homes of their own — with the intention of forcing them to recant.

In 1979 the government started dismissing all Bahá'í civil servants without compensation. By July 1982, all Bahá'í public servants had been dismissed and the pensions of all retired Bahá'í civil servants had been terminated.

In late 1984, the Attorney General started issuing summonses demanding that all those Bahá'í civil servants who had been dismissed repay salaries they had received during their employment. They were threatened with imprisonment if they did not comply. Obviously, repayment of a lifetime's wages was beyond the means of most victims. Many were imprisoned as a result of failure to meet this absurd demand.

The government has also systematically sought to drive Bahá'ís in the private sector to economic ruin. In the early 1980s, the trading licenses of most Bahá'í businessmen were revoked, the assets of businesses run by Bahá'ís were confiscated, and bank accounts of most Bahá'í businessmen were frozen. In addition, the authorities intimidated private employers into dismissing many Bahá'í employees.

Almost every dismissal notice served on a Bahá'í employee, whether in the public or the private sector, stated that the reason for dismissal was membership in the Bahá'í Faith and that the individual's job would be restored if he or she would recant his or her faith.

Two recent court cases, for example, demonstrate the efforts of the authorities to impede Bahá'ís from conducting private business activities.

***In the destruction of Bahá'í holy places, the Iranian government also demonstrates the lengths to which it will go to suffocate the Bahá'í community and to cleanse its culture from modern memory — even though it may mean destroying monuments and buildings of historic importance to the society at large.***

In September 2003, Branch 13 of the Tribunal of Administrative Justice rejected an appeal by a Bahá'í businessman against an injunction that required him to cease his business operations. The court also rejected his petition to obtain a business license. The tribunal held that his appeal was “disqualified as irrelevant, as [it was] outside the scope of the applicable regulations”, citing the information the court had “about the plaintiff’s being associated with the perverse Bahá'í sect.”

In 2003, in a second, similar case, an administrative injunction was issued to impede a Bahá'í-owned company in Isfahan from doing business. The company is owned and directed by a Bahá'í engineer and employs some 120 staff — most of whom are Bahá'ís — manufacturing electrical and communication cables. In the injunction, the Director-General of the Central Office of Protection, which is under the Iranian Ministry of Post, Telegraph and Telephone, informed the company of an official memorandum issued in April 2003. The document concluded that “the link between the... company... and the perverse Bahá'í sect is established to be true; therefore it is advisable to adopt measures to prevent any collaboration with the above-mentioned company”.

In addition to depriving Bahá'ís of a livelihood, the government in the early 1980s sought to deprive arrested Bahá'ís of many of their pos-

sessions, including their homes. Over the years hundreds of Bahá'í properties have been confiscated, a practice that continues.

In October 2004, for example, the homes of six Bahá'í families in the village of Kata (in the Buyir-Ahmad region of Iran) were confiscated on the order of the prosecutor of the city of Shiraz, with the assistance of the local police.

In virtually every case, court judgments or documents have emerged that prove the properties were confiscated because the owners were Bahá'ís.

## **Destruction of Holy Places**

In the destruction of Bahá'í holy places, the Iranian government also demonstrates the lengths to which it will go to suffocate the Bahá'í community and to cleanse its culture from modern memory — even though it may mean destroying monuments and buildings of historic importance to the society at large.

In June 2004, authorities demolished an historic house in Tehran that had been designed and owned by Mirza Abbas Nuri, the father of Bahá'u'lláh. The house was not only significant to Bahá'ís but was also considered to be a sterling example of period architecture of historic importance to Iranian culture.

Mirza Abbas Nuri himself was widely regarded as one of Iran’s greatest calligraphers and statesmen. In July 2004, the Iranian newspaper *Hamshabri* published a lengthy article about his life and the architecture of his house.

“As he had good taste for the arts and for beauty, he designed his own house in such a style that it became known as one of the most beautiful houses of that period,” wrote Iman Mihdizadih in *Hamshabri* on 13 July 2004. “The plasterwork and the tile-work in the rooms as well as the verdant veranda, the courtyard with its central pool, and the trees planted in the flowerbeds, all created a tranquil atmosphere in this house.”

The destruction of the house of Mirza Abbas Nuri followed the razing in April 2004 of





*In April 2004, in Babol, the house-like gravesite of Quddus, an historic figure of the Bahá'í Faith, was destroyed.*



*In June 2004, the house of Bahá'u'lláh's father, Mirza Abbas Nuri, was likewise destroyed, despite being a treasured example of Islamic-Iranian architecture.*

*Over the years, as well, in Tehran and other cities throughout Iran, Bahá'í buildings have been looted and burned, Bahá'í cemeteries have been bulldozed and Bahá'í graves have been broken open. In the Tehran area, the Bahá'ís were forced to bury their dead in a barren stretch of land reserved by the authorities for “infidels.” Having access to their own cemeteries is especially important to Bahá'ís because, as might be expected, they are not allowed to bury their dead in Muslim cemeteries.*

another historic Bahá'í property, the gravesite of Quddus, an historic figure of the Bahá'í Faith. The action came after demolition work started in February that year and then halted temporarily in the face of protest at the local, national, and international levels.

The house-like structure marked the resting place of Mullah Muhammad-Ali Barfurushi, known as Quddus (The Most Holy). Quddus was the foremost disciple of the Báb, the Prophet-Herald of the Bahá'í Faith.

The destruction of two such important holy sites in 2004 was not without precedent. As noted, the House of the Báb, the holiest Bahá'í shrine in Iran, was destroyed in 1979. The House of Bahá'u'lláh in Takur, where the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith spent His childhood, was also demolished shortly after the Islamic revolution and the site was offered for sale to the public.

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## Arbitrary Arrests and Harassment

Beyond such specific efforts at cultural cleansing, the government has in recent years continued its policy of keeping the Bahá'í community off balance through various measures, including arbitrary arrests, short term detention, persistent harassment, and other forms of intimidation and discrimination. Indeed, there has been a recent wave of arbitrary arrests and detentions, raising concerns that the government may be preparing overall for a new round of persecutions.

In March, April and May of 2005 some 35 Bahá'ís in cities and towns across Iran were arrested and held for short periods, ranging from a week to nearly three months. One remains in prison. Those arrested included not only prominent members of the community in Tehran, but also six Bahá'ís in Shiraz, nine in the city of Semnan, and nine Bahá'í farmers whose homes and land had previously been confiscated in the village of Kata.

Most were arbitrarily detained without any charge being filed against them. Some of the prisoners were held incommunicado, in unknown locations, while their families desperately searched for them. Most were released only after having posted significant amounts of money, property deeds, or business licenses as bail.

Moreover, government agents conducted prolonged searches of many of the homes of those

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who were arrested, confiscating documents, books, computers, copiers, and other belongings.

Also recently in the city of Yazd, long a center of anti-Bahá'í activities, it appears that the police chief orchestrated a series of incidents against Bahá'ís. In late 2004 and early 2005, a number of Bahá'ís were arrested, detained, and interrogated; several were beaten in their homes; at least one Bahá'í-owned business was set afire; and the Bahá'í graveyard was desecrated.

Such incidents are hardly isolated. In 2003, for example, 23 Bahá'ís in 18 different localities in Iran were subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention for short periods of time. In all cases, Iranian authorities summoned these people because they were Bahá'ís, questioned them about their beliefs, and then released them.

In 2002, 17 Bahá'í youth who were participating in a camp were arrested and detained for questioning. Reports about this incident in the Iranian press carried a negative slant, referring to the young Bahá'ís in a derogatory and vulgar manner.

## Conclusion

**T**HE CAMPAIGN OF the Islamic Republic of Iran against that country's non-violent Bahá'í community stands out not only for its quality of wrongful discrimination — Iran's Bahá'ís are persecuted solely for their religious belief — but also for its thoroughness of conception and subtle implementation.

In 1979, almost as soon as it was born, the Islamic Republic began a wholesale campaign of executions, imprisonments and torture aimed at Iran's 300,000-member Bahá'í community. By 1983, nearly 150 Bahá'ís had been killed or executed, hundreds had been imprisoned, and thousands had been forced out of employment. The number of those killed would eventually reach more than 200.

Beyond such atrocities, however, the Iranian government also explicitly targeted the Bahá'í children and youth. Shortly after the Islamic revolution, virtually all Bahá'í students were expelled from schools and blocked from higher education.

International pressure soon forced Iran to scale back the killings and imprisonments — as well as its exclusion of primary and secondary school children from public education.

The government, however, has not yet allowed Bahá'í youth to attend colleges and universities in Iran.

The ongoing action to prevent Bahá'ís from obtaining higher education, which in the modern world is the key to social and economic progress and advancement, is a clear sign of the government's thoroughness of effort in seeking to destroy the Bahá'í community as a viable entity.

The official decree barring Bahá'í students from admission to public university was issued in

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1981, soon after the Islamic revolution. That year, universities published new prospectuses requiring that applicants belong to one of the four religions recognized in the constitution, namely the Muslim, Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian religions.

In 1991, the government reiterated that policy, in a secret memorandum that outlined with ingenious intention a plan to “block” the development of the Bahá'í community. “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,” the memorandum said.

That the Iranian government persists in this policy today, continuing to block all access to higher education for Bahá'í young people whose only transgression is to profess a system of belief that Iran's mullahs have declared counter to Islam, challenges the modern imagination.

While seeking trade and other favors with the international community, the government has in its latest manifestation of this effort sought to deceive those who seek to monitor its human rights record with a ploy to make it appear that

it is Iranian Bahá'ís themselves who are refusing to enroll in Iran's colleges and universities. The government did this by playing on the known fact that Bahá'ís will never compromise on their fundamental religious principles.

But ploy or no ploy, the Iranian government's actions are nevertheless clear: they amount to an illegal and unacceptable denial of the right to education for Bahá'ís in Iran.

Like young people everywhere, Bahá'í youth in Iran desperately desire the opportunities and insights that come with higher education. This is especially so because the teachings of their faith

stress the importance of knowledge and learning — and because those same teachings also emphasizes the importance of contributing to society at large.

Over the last 25 years, the only source of protection and encouragement for the Iranian Bahá'í community has been international concern, as expressed through the United Nations, by governments, and in the news media.

One can only hope that the world's academic leaders will now follow suit in protesting the blatantly unjust oppression that continues to confront the young people of Iran's Bahá'í community.

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