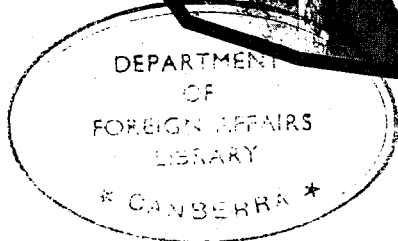


The Baha'is of Iran

The Minority Rights Group Report No. 51



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The Baha'is of Iran

By Roger Cooper

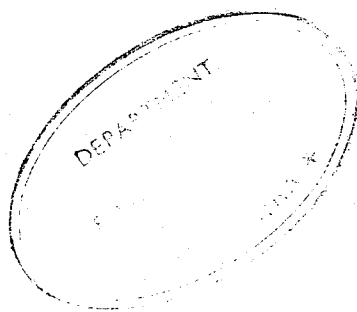
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THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from any fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if a man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law.

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations.

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge.

Now, Therefore,

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims

THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Article 1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7. All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8. Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10. Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11. (1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.

(2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offence, under national or international law, at the time when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offence was committed.

Article 12. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13. (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.

(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14. (1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

(2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15. (1) Everyone has the right to a nationality.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16. (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

(3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17. (1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19. Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20. (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

(2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21. (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

(2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.

(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22. Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23. (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.

(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.

(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interest.

Article 24. Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25. (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26. (1) 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.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27. (1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

(2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Article 28. Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29. (1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

(2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

(3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30. Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared at a time when Baha'is in Iran are suffering on a scale unprecedented in this century. The Revolution in Iran has led to an upsurge in fanaticism and intolerance that has surprised many who thought they understood the country and believed that the sense of nationalism (chauvinistic though it could often be) and a reputed tolerance of other religions were stronger than the often harsh ordinances of Shi'a Islam, the official religion of the country since the sixteenth century.

Since the initial triumph of the Revolution in February 1979, various groups actively opposed to the regime, or considered subversive or detrimental to it, have suffered material or physical persecution. The first, understandably perhaps, were individuals who had played prominent roles in maintaining the former regime, such as politicians and senior officers of the armed forces and secret police, dozens of whom were executed in the first six months.

Next it was the turn of the ethnic minorities, particularly Kurds and Arabs, but also Turks, Baluchis and Turkomans, all of whom hoped for greater autonomy than they enjoyed under the Shah's centralized rule.

The third wave of executions began in the summer of 1980, when Sheikh Khalkhali was appointed, by President Bani-Sadr, as head of the anti-narcotics campaign. Wearing a combination of military and clerical dress, he stalked the land, arresting, trying and supervising the execution of scores of drug manufacturers and peddlars, the whole process rarely taking more than a day. In doing so, he won international notoriety and domestic popularity. During this period, rumours of plots within the armed forces led to widespread arrests, often followed by executions, of officers whose loyalty was in doubt.

The outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq in September 1980 resulted in a decline in the rate of arrests and executions. Some (but by no means all) of those who had been arrested on plot-charges were released and sent to the front. But this lull proved to be temporary. By the summer of 1981 the conflict flared again between the fundamentalist clergy-led Islamic Republican Party, which had emerged as the strongest political organization, and the Mojahedin-e Khalq, the 'People's Combatants', who sought to combine Islamic ideology with radical socialism. The President, who had never shared the ideals of the fundamentalists and now considered himself the representative of the intellectuals and moderates, moved ever closer to the Mojahedin. Even with (and to some extent because of) their support, he found himself increasingly isolated in the political forum and in June 1981 he was impeached by the Majlis and with the blessing of Ayatollah Khomeini dismissed from the presidency. After spending a month in hiding he fled Iran in July and, since then, he has set up a kind of government-in-exile in France, with the head of the Mojahedin as his 'prime minister'.

These events and the related assassination of many prominent members of the regime, including Mohammad 'Ali Raja'i, who had been elected President, and Mohammad Javad Bahonar, his prime minister, led to severe repression against the Mojahedin. It is estimated that within four months of Bani-Sadr's impeachment some 2,000 Mojahedin supporters – or alleged supporters – were executed, often after 'trials' lasting only a few minutes, including a number of street executions.

The sheer number of Mojahedin killed has tended to obscure the quite different repression against members of the Baha'i community. Unlike some of the other groups persecuted in Iran, the Baha'is have never individually or collectively advocated violence; they are enjoined by their own ordinances not to participate in politics and to obey the governments of the countries they live in.

While initially sceptical that the publication of such a report could help end or even mitigate the persecution of Baha'is, and fearing that it might be counter-productive in the current anti-Western climate of opinion in Iran, the author was ultimately persuaded that the report might be beneficial. Although, whether in English or Persian, it is almost certain to be banned in Iran, where mere possession of anything that could be considered 'Baha'i propaganda' is a dangerous offence, it may be of use to those who meet or have dealings with Iranians abroad, or the small number of foreigners still travelling to Iran. Official and unofficial Iranian attitudes

towards Baha'is are largely (but not exclusively) based on misconceptions, so any attempt to correct these, and thereby perhaps modify attitudes, is surely worthwhile.

For most of its existence the Islamic Republic of Iran has been at pains to ignore or misrepresent world opinion, while ascribing to it ulterior motives such as 'imperialist' (or American) 'propaganda', but towards the end of 1981 there was evidence of an official desire to improve its image among the international community. If this desire is genuine, Western (and Eastern) pressure on the Baha'i question could be helpful.

THE BAHA'I RELIGION

The Origins

Most of what are called 'world religions' have their roots in the Middle East. Iran, where Zoroastrianism, Manicheism and Mazdakism were born and major developments to Judaism, Mithraism, Gnosticism and Islam took place, has proved particularly fertile in this respect. Although the majority of Iranians have been Muslims since at least the ninth century, sects and orders, orthodoxies and heterodoxies have proliferated there in a way matched perhaps by no other country. Right up to the present day, religious speculation has always been a primary interest of the Iranians, one that has deeply permeated their art, literature, social life and politics.

Although Iran is the only modern state where the Shi'a branch of Islam both predominates and is the 'official' religion, this has not always been the case. For the first 900 years of Islam the Iranians adhered chiefly to the Sunni branch of Islam, but early in the sixteenth century, with the advent to secular power of the Safavids, a rapid conversion to the Shi'a rite took place in the main towns and dependent villages, with only the remote ethnic minorities – Kurds, Baluchis and Turkomans – remaining Sunni. For a brief period in the eighteenth century Iran was again governed by a Sunni monarch – the great conqueror Nader Shah – but his influence on religion proved negligible, and Shi'ism continued supreme.

The principal difference between the two branches is that the Shi'is believe that the spiritual and temporal leadership of the Islamic community (the Imamate) is vested by hereditary succession in the lineal descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his son-in-law and cousin 'Ali b. Abu Talib, while the Sunnis believe that Muhammad was succeeded by caliphs accepted by the community on grounds other than their ancestry. The Sunnis rely exclusively on the Koran, the *hadith* (sayings ascribed to the Prophet) and the *sunna* (the 'path' or model life exemplified by him), as expounded by four medieval schools of jurisprudence, while the Shi'is, in addition to the Koran, add their own versions of the *hadith* and *sunna* and the teachings of the Imams, and accept that in the absence of the Imam certain others, particularly the '*ulama*' (religious scholars), can advise the community.

The Shi'a (the word itself means 'faction') is further fragmented into numerous rival sects, which differ chiefly over the succession of Imams. The most numerous, and the one prevalent in Iran, is the Ja'fari or Twelver sect, which believes in a succession of 12 Imams, the last of whom reputedly disappeared about 878. This 'Hidden Imam' did not die, but lives in the mythical city of Jabulqa, from where he will return as the *Mahdi*, the divinely guided one, also called the Lord of the Age, shortly before the Day of Resurrection, to usher in an age of perfect justice. The Imams, who are infallible and impeccable, are descended from the union of 'Ali and Fatima, respectively the Prophet's cousin and daughter. According to popular belief, their second son, Husain, the Third Imam, married the daughter of the last pre-Islamic ruler of Iran, Yazdegerd III, so all the later Imams are part-Iranian. Some degree of Persian nationalism is therefore involved in the deep respect in which the Imams are held. The Shi'is believe that the Prophet nominated 'Ali as his successor, but that his rights were usurped. Husain's ill-starred attempt to regain these rights, which resulted in his death and that of his companions in a one-sided battle at Karbala in 680, is celebrated annually with the deepest mourning.

After the golden age of the Safavids, when for over a century Isfahan rivalled any European capital in size and opulence, Iran began a slow decline, falling behind the West in technological and

political prowess. As Russia expanded southwards Iran lost more and more territory, which the weak and corrupt Qajar dynasty could do nothing to prevent. While many progressive Iranians looked to Western models for salvation, others sought social reform in religious revival.

Among the religious reformers of the early nineteenth century was Shaikh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i (died 1826), who taught that at all times there must be a 'Perfect Shi'i', in direct spiritual contact with the Hidden Imam, whose appearance as the Mahdi was imminent. His successor, Sayyed Kazem of Rasht, developed what became known as the Shaikhi school, and at the latter's death his followers set off in different directions to find the Perfect Shi'i.

A leading Shaikhi, Molla Hosain of Boshruyeh, arrived in Shiraz, south Iran, on 23 May 1844. He was met by a young merchant named Sayyed 'Ali Mohammad, who announced to him that evening that he was the one the Shaikhis were seeking. For 69 years after his occultation the Twelfth Imam had become invisible to most of his followers, communicating with them through a series of four intermediaries, each known as a 'gate' (*bab*). It was in this sense, as a gate of communication with the Hidden Imam, that Sayyed 'Ali Mohammad styled himself and was accepted as the Bab. Molla Hosain acknowledged the claim and became the first of his 18 closest disciples, termed 'the Letters of the Living'. Sending his disciples all over Iran to proclaim the new millenarian message, the Bab himself went on pilgrimage to Mecca, where he openly declared his mission, to prepare men for the imminent return of the Mahdi. On his return to Shiraz, the Bab and several of his disciples were arrested as heretics, and he was to remain in captivity for the rest of his short life. Among his converts were several prominent Iranians, including, according to some sources, a leading theologian sent by the Shah to investigate the Bab's claims. The religious authorities, however, were united against him, and he was banished to a remote fortress in northwest Iran. In captivity he wrote his principal work, the *Bayan*, which summarized his teachings. In July 1848 the Bab was examined by a committee of leading divines and judged guilty of heresy. Sentence was not carried out until 9 July 1850, however, when he was executed by firing-squad in the main barracks of Tabriz.

The early teachings of the Bab were just within the bounds of Twelver Shi'ism, and won converts among the influential merchant class and even the clergy. Many Iranians were disillusioned by the corruption and decay affecting their country and religion, and saw the Bab's message as one of hope and enlightenment. Gradually Babism moved away from Islam. A gathering of Babis declared the laws of Islam to have been abrogated by the Bab's message. Having at first claimed to be the 'gate' to the Hidden Imam, he later announced that he was the Mahdi, and finally that he was an independent prophet or divine manifestation authorized by God to reveal a new religion that would displace Islam. Many of his teachings were simplifications, often 'progressive' ones, of Islamic rules. He allowed a man to have not more than two wives, and banned opium. He also taught that another divine manifestation of God would one day appear, and the Baha'is believe this to have been Baha'ullah.

During the period 1848-52 repression against Babis was commonplace. Most historians refer to Babi 'uprisings' or 'rebellions', while Babi and Baha'i writers generally see the Babis as totally innocent and the persecution as unjustified fanaticism. Mohammad Shah died in 1848 and the first years of the reign of his successor Naser od-Din Shah were a period of uncertainty and instability. Over a four-year period at least 3,000 Babis were put to death. Babis were forced to practice *taqiya* (religious dissimulation) or follow their leaders into exile. Although the Babi threat to the state must have ended in 1852, if not earlier, it continued to preoccupy the Shah, his ministers and the clergy until the end of the century, and perhaps even later.

After the Bab's execution a number of his followers claimed to be his successor, but the majority of Babis recognized Mirza Yahya Nuri, better known as Sobh-e Azal, whom the Bab had apparently designated. But it was to his half-brother, Mirza Hosain 'Ali Nuri, that most Babis ultimately transferred their allegiance, once he had declared that he was a manifestation of God.

Born in Tehran in 1817, the son of Mirza Bozorg, a powerful minister of the crown, Mirza Hosain 'Ali was deeply interested in spiritual matters from childhood, and as a young man became a convert to Babism, although he never met the Bab in person. He

was arrested in 1852 during the Babi purge and held for several months in Tehran's Siah Chal ('Black Dungeon') prison. There he dreamt that he was 'He whom God shall manifest', the one prophesied by the Bab. But unlike the many Babis who perished at this time Mirza Hosain 'Ali was released, on condition that he left Iran. He chose to go into exile in Iraq, then a province of the Ottoman Empire, having also been offered sanctuary in Russia. In 1853 he settled with his family in Baghdad, as did Sobh-e Azal, but following a disagreement between the brothers he suddenly withdrew to the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan, where he lived as a hermit and styled himself Darvish Mohammad. Two years later the Babis in Baghdad traced him and persuaded him to return, whereupon he gradually replaced Sobh-e Azal as leader of the community.

Mirza Hosain 'Ali restored the morale of the Babis, and won many converts to the faith among the thousands of Iranian pilgrims who visited the Shi'i shrines of Iraq each year. Alarmed at his growing influence, which they viewed as subversive, the Shah's government requested the Ottoman authorities to return him to Iran or move him further from the frontier. In 1863 he was ordered to Edirne (Adrianople). Shortly before his departure he told the community that he was Baha'ullah, the Glory of God, the Universal Manifestation of God foretold by the Bab.

Sobh-e Azal refused to acknowledge the claim, and this marked the final schism between the two brothers. The Turkish authorities then exiled the Baha'is, as Baha'ullah's followers were henceforth known, to 'Akka (Acre), then part of the Ottoman province of Syria, and the Azalis, as those who supported Sobh-e Azal were known, to Famagusta in Cyprus. Most Babis came to accept Baha'ullah's claim, and therefore became Baha'is.

Development of the Faith

Baha'ullah and his followers arrived in 'Akka in 1868, where they were imprisoned in disused barracks. Life was at first harsh, but Baha'ullah continued to write prolifically, producing in his lifetime as much as the total volume of scripture revealed by all previous divine manifestations, according to his own statement. Conditions gradually improved and Baha'ullah was finally allowed to leave the confines of the town and settle in a comfortable villa outside the town. He lived until 1892, when he died peacefully at the age of 75.

Baha'ullah appointed his eldest son 'Abbas Effendi to succeed him as head of the Baha'i community. 'Abbas Effendi is better known as 'Abdu'l-Baha (Servant of the Glory), a name he adopted to signify that his role was merely to tend to the needs of the community, particularly in elucidating the Baha'i scriptures. The succession did not go unchallenged, however. Once again a rival claimant to the leadership came from within the family, from his half-brother, Mirza Mohammad 'Ali. Another leading Baha'i, Ibrahim Khairullah, a Lebanese physician whose missionary work in the United States had led to communities being established in Chicago, New York and elsewhere also demanded recognition as co-head, but both failed in their claims and were expelled from the community.

For many years Abdu'l-Baha had been virtually confined to the 'Akka region as a political prisoner, but the Young Turk rebellion led to such prisoners being freed, and in 1911 he was able to set out on a journey to Europe and North America. For the next three years he lectured extensively on the faith in churches, synagogues, public halls and universities, winning many converts. He always visited the poor areas of the cities he travelled to and stressed the need for giving equal rights to the minorities. On one occasion he publicly married two Baha'is, one black, one white, a rare occurrence at the time.

Back in 'Akka just before war broke out, 'Abdu'l-Baha again fell under suspicion as a dissident but was nevertheless able to organize a campaign to grow food for the people of 'Akka, whose normal supplies had been requisitioned for the army. In 1920 he was awarded a British knighthood in recognition of his 'consistently loyal service to the British cause since the occupation', but he never used the title. He died in 1921, declaring in his will that he should be succeeded by the Universal House of Justice headed by a Guardian, who would be empowered to interpret the Baha'i scriptures. The Guardianship should thereafter remain in

Baha'ullah's family, but succession would not be automatic. Each Guardian should nominate the most exemplary of eligible successors. 'Abdu'l-Baha himself appointed his eldest grandson, Shoghi Rabbani, then a second-year student at Oxford. Once again succession was marred by hostility from within the family, but Shoghi Effendi, as the Guardian became known, kept the allegiance of almost all Baha'is.

Shoghi Effendi's first task was to consolidate the faith through administrative means. An able organizer, he also translated into English many of the writings of Baha'ullah and 'Abdu'l-Baha. He maintained the trend towards westernizing the faith, dropping his grandfather's habit of attending Friday prayers. As an official Baha'i history puts it, 'Now that the Faith was firmly established as an independent religion it was no longer considered appropriate for its head to be seen showing special ties with another religion.' Work was speeded up on the translation of Baha'i texts into many languages. Plans were made for a Baha'i world centre in Haifa, by now situated in the mandated territory of Palestine, including the proposed Universal House of Justice.

By 1957, when Shoghi Effendi died suddenly in London, the Baha'i faith was well established throughout the world. Although there had been isolated outbursts of persecution, particularly in Iran, Egypt, Germany and the Soviet Union, Shoghi Effendi's Guardianship was in general characterized by steady and peaceful growth. On his death it was established that he had not nominated a successor (he and his Canadian-born wife had no children) so yet again the question of the succession rocked the community. A senior Baha'i declared himself to be the second Guardian and was duly excommunicated. The vast majority endorsed the decision to proceed with plans for the election of the Universal House of Justice, which took place in 1963. Since then missionary work has increased, particularly in North America, India, South-East Asia, Africa and South America. Large numbers of Canadian Indians, rural Blacks in the southern United States, as well as educated young people in both countries, have become Baha'is, and over 100,000 Vietnamese were converted. Although no official membership figures have been published it is generally thought that the worldwide community today exceeds three million, with about one million in India alone. Estimates for Iran vary between 150,000 and 300,000. When the fourth Universal House of Justice was elected in 1978, there were 130 National Spiritual Assemblies and 21,099 Local Spiritual Assemblies, and growth continues to be rapid. The Baha'i faith can truly call itself a world religion.

Religious Beliefs and Practices¹

Baha'is believe in a God who is completely transcendent and unknowable. God is 'beyond every human attribute such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent'. They differ here from Jewish, Christian and Muslim mystics, who believe that knowledge of and even union with God are attainable. God the creator is coeternal with creation itself, which is the manifestation of God's unknowable essence. To the Baha'i, divine manifestation also occurs in the form of prophets or messengers, often termed Divine Educators, who are considered mirrors of God's reflection. Each such manifestation is both a part of God's unity and a 'distinct individuality', and it is knowledge of and faith in the manifestation of the age that prevents agnosticism. While all 'true' religions are essentially one, their messages differ, depending on the level of society and civilization in the age in which they are revealed.

Such divine manifestations have occurred throughout the ages. Baha'is believe, the first prophet being Adam, followed by the prophets of Judaism, such as Abraham and Moses, then Jesus, then Muhammad. This doctrine matches Islamic teaching, but the Baha'is, unlike Muslims, also recognize Buddha, and the Iranian prophet Zoroaster. Confucius is recognized as a reformer, but not a prophet. Whereas Muslims consider Muhammad the 'seal' of the prophets, Baha'is recognize the Bab as an independent divine manifestation, whose mission was chiefly to prepare the way for Baha'ullah. Baha'is believe that the founder of their faith will be followed by other divine manifestations as mankind develops, but that this will not happen for at least one thousand years. They also believe in a prophetic 'cycle', beginning with Adam and ending with the Bab, followed by the Baha'i cycle, called 'the cycle of fulfilment', which will last for at least half a million years. The important doctrinal point here is that Baha'is accept all prophetic

religions as being true, but claim that theirs is the one most suitable to the present age. The Baha'i faith can be said to 'incorporate' all previous divinely-revealed religions.

Baha'i scripture consists of the writings of Bab, Baha'ullah and 'Abdu'l-Baha, but not their spoken words unless they were committed to writing and the texts confirmed by the speaker. The most important sacred text is Baha'ullah's *Kitab al-Aqdas* (The Most Holy Book), which superseded the *Bayan*, the chief scripture 'revealed' by the Bab. The role of Shoghi Effendi, who succeeded 'Abdu'l-Baha as Guardian, was confined to temporal guidance and the interpretation of existing scriptures.

Faith is essential to Baha'i spiritual life, and is based on the free choice of an individual. On reaching maturity the children of Baha'is must decide for themselves if they wish to join the community. It is not an automatic fact as is the case with Muslims. Since God is unknowable, faith must be in the divine manifestation and it is faith that makes a believer immortal. Heaven is symbolic of man's eternal journey towards God, hell of the journey towards annihilation made by the evil-doer, who rejects the message of the divine manifestation. Baha'is do not reject theories of the evolution of man, but believe that as 'the noblest and most perfect of all created things', man has always been man since creation. Strict Darwinian natural selection is therefore incompatible with Baha'i teaching. Man was created to worship God and 'carry forward an ever-advancing civilization'.

Baha'is lay great emphasis on improving and unifying society. They believe in the unity of man and religion, in sexual equality², in universal education and world peace, and in the introduction of a world calendar and an auxiliary international language. They are opposed to all kinds of prejudice, whether based on race, religion, class or nationality, and to extremes of wealth and poverty.

Baha'is follow no public ritual but are exhorted to assemble on the first day of each of the 19 months of the Babi calendar, which they adopted. These meetings are known as the 'Nineteen Day Feasts', since they are held every 19 days. At these meetings they read Baha'i prayers and sacred texts, discuss administrative and financial affairs and take a small communal meal. They fast from sunrise to sunset for the 19 days preceding 21 March, the first day of spring, which is their New Year's Day. Prayer is obligatory, either once or three times a day, depending on the prayers used. There is a short prayer to be said at noon and a longer one that can be used at any time. The prayers were originally written in Arabic by Baha'ullah, but can now be recited in any language. Anyone professing faith in Baha'ullah can become a Baha'i, without any special ceremony.

The consumption of alcohol and narcotics, except on medical advice, is prohibited, and smoking is discouraged. Prohibited practices also include all extra-marital sexual activity, homosexuality, gambling, begging, calumny, cruelty to animals, cremation and the confession of sins except to God, as well as such crimes as arson, theft and murder.

In cases of intestacy a deceased's property is divided among the heirs according to set rules, with a share going to teachers, and there are voluntary contributions to local and central funds, the proceeds going to community welfare projects and the propagation of the faith. Marriage is now in practice monogamous. The consent of all four living parents is necessary for a marriage, whatever the age of the parties and even between a Baha'i and a non-Baha'i. Divorce, though permitted, is strongly discouraged.

There is no priesthood in the Baha'i faith, in the sense of persons qualified to administer sacraments, but there is an administrative hierarchy with considerable authority. Prayer is an individual rather than a communal obligation. The Nineteen Day Feasts are normally held by rotation in members' houses. A limited number of Houses of Worship, domed buildings with nine entrances, open to people of every race and creed, have already been built. These are in Wilmette, Ill., Frankfurt-am-Main, Kampala, Sydney, Western Samoa and Panama City, with another under construction in India. In these temples no preaching takes place and only the human voice is used to sing, chant or read selections from Baha'i and non-Baha'i scriptures. Around these temples, which Baha'is believe will one day be built in every locality, will be grouped a school, library, hospital, rest-house and orphanage. In addition, pilgrimage (*hajj*) is made to the tombs of the Bab, Baha'ullah and 'Abdu'l-Baha, all

¹ For footnotes see page 15

in Israel, Baha'ullah's house in Baghdad, and the Bab's house in Shiraz. For political reasons it is not possible at present for Baha'is to perform the pilgrimages to holy places in Iraq and Iran, while the Bab's house in Shiraz has been destroyed.

The Baha'i faith is organized by means of a complex system of administration, outlined in the *Kitab al-Aqdas* and further elucidated by Baha'ullah's successors. Wherever the number of adult Baha'is in a locality exceeds nine they should elect a nine-member 'Local Spiritual Assembly'. Election is by secret ballot and the votes of all Baha'is without nominations or canvassing, and each Baha'i must cast exactly nine votes. An individual may be deprived of the right to vote for infraction of Baha'i law. Wherever sufficient local spiritual assemblies are formed a group of delegates elected by the entire Baha'i community in each country elects a 'National Spiritual Assembly' of nine members, from among the entire Baha'i community in the country concerned. Since 1963 the highest organ of the administration, the Universal House of Justice, foreseen by Baha'ullah, has been in existence. Elections are held every five years by means of a convention of members of every National Spiritual Assembly. From its headquarters in Haifa, the Universal House of Justice also exercises legislative and judicial functions, passing laws on subjects not dealt with in the Baha'i scriptures and repealing their own legislation when necessary. Baha'is are expected to refer private affairs, including any difference with a fellow-believer, to their local spiritual assembly, and if necessary to the national body or the Universal House of Justice. Other institutions include the appointed bodies known as the Hands of the Cause of God and the Continental Board of Counsellors, both concerned with spreading the faith and protecting the Baha'i community. The counsellors are appointed by and work under the direction of the Universal House of Justice.

Baha'is, like Shi'i Muslims, do not separate, at least in theory, secular and spiritual affairs, and can in many ways be described as a theocracy without priests. They see their system of administration as a prototype of an ideal world government, which will gradually come into being through peaceful means. As a corollary to this, they are forbidden to belong to political parties or secret societies, yet are enjoined to respect the legal authority of the state where they live. Where conscientious objection to military service is permitted they should ask to be exempted for such service in a combatant capacity, and they should volunteer for alternative service. If exemption is not permitted or granted, however, they should obey whatever instructions their government gives them. Although Baha'is always seek peaceful solutions to conflict, they support the concept of an international peace-keeping force, and the concept of a just war, so cannot be termed pacifists.

The Baha'is lay particular stress on education, and wherever possible establish their own schools or classes, which non-believers may attend. If resources are limited, they believe, priority in education should go to women. As early as 1912 'Abdu'l-Baha was stressing this point: 'The education of women is of greater importance than the education of men, for they are the mothers of the race . . . The first teachers of children are the mothers . . . Daughters and sons must follow the same curriculum of study, thereby promoting unity of the sexes. When all mankind shall receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed.' Baha'i educational philosophy aims at a balance between intellectual learning and manual skills. The goal is a basic education for all mankind so as to eliminate illiteracy, ignorance and prejudice, and 'teach a profession, art or trade so that every member of the community will be enabled to earn his own livelihood'. Educational standards in Baha'i communities in the Third World are usually higher than the national average. In the industrialized countries Baha'is tend towards occupations where the opportunities to improve society are greatest, such as medicine, teaching and social service.

It may already have been noted that numerology played an important part in Babi practice, and vestiges of this can be seen in some Baha'i usages. Arabic letters traditionally have numerical values. Those forming the word *wahid* (one), for example, add up to a total of 19, which is therefore seen as an extension of divine unity. The Bab would not reveal his mission publicly until 18 followers had recognized him, giving a total of 19 believers. The Babi-Baha'i calendar has 19 months, each of 19 days (with four or five intercalary days added to reach the number of days in a solar

year). The number 9, used for assembly membership and in other symbolic ways, is also of some religious significance.

Another Baha'i characteristic with its roots in Babi practice is the use of special titles and epithets, some of which seem strange to outsiders, although a common Islamic practice, particularly among the Shi'is. Thus Baha'ullah, a name that is already a title, is often referred to in Baha'i works 'the Blessed Perfection', 'the Most Sublime Pen' or 'the Tongue of Grandeur', and his sons by such titles as 'the Purest Branch', 'the Most Great Branch' (daughters are 'Leaves'), while 'Akka becomes 'the Most Great Prison', Edirne 'the Remote Prison', and so on. Within the community Baha'is are often referred to as 'Friends' and the faith is known as 'the Cause of God'. When the Bab or Baha'ullah is referred to by a pronoun this is capitalized.

The scriptures 'revealed' by the Bab and Baha'ullah, whether in Arabic or Persian, are mostly couched in a style and language reminiscent of that of the Koran (Arabists have noted grammatical errors, however, in the Arabic works of the Bab and Baha'ullah, whose mother tongue was of course Persian, not Arabic). The Baha'i scriptures often read rather too floridly for the taste of non-believers. Baha'i prayers and scriptures have been translated into some 700 languages (although often only a few prayers) yet there is no version in modern everyday English, as is the trend with Christian scriptures. As an example of Baha'i scripture the opening lines of the Proclamation of Baha'ullah to the Rulers of America may be quoted: 'Hearken ye, O Rulers of America and the Presidents of the Republics therein, unto that which the Dove is warbling on the Branch of Eternity: There is none other God but Me, the Ever-Abiding, the Forgiving, the All-Bountiful. Adorn ye the temple of dominion with the ornament of justice and of the fear of God, and its head with the crown of the remembrance of your Lord, the Creator of the Heavens.' Whatever the intention of this Proclamation, there was obviously a communication gap between 'Akka and the White House of President Ulysses Grant, to whom it was primarily addressed. Many Baha'i writers continue to use an archaic, orotund style, modelled on that of Shoghi Effendi.

As the historical outline and this brief summary of its beliefs and practices show, the Baha'i faith has been heavily influenced by earlier religious traditions, particularly Babism, the Messianic doctrines of the Shaikhi school and Shi'a Islam generally. These in turn were affected by Persian cultural influences and the Judaic-Christian tradition. This is scarcely surprising in a religion which was born in Iran and claims to be a contemporary version of an eternal truth. It is interesting that despite the schisms it has already undergone, the Baha'i faith has adapted so quickly to changing circumstances. It is this adaptability which has strengthened its claim to universality and enabled it to develop from an obscure oriental sect into a religion with adherents in almost every country in the world. To a large extent, this was the result not only of the teachings and personality of Baha'ullah himself but also of the missionary zeal of 'Abdu'l-Baha and the organizational skills of Shoghi Effendi, who was already three generations removed from Baha'ullah and culturally oriented towards the West. 'Abdu'l-Baha, and even more so Shoghi Effendi, made conscious efforts to distance the faith from its Iranian origins, fearing, probably with some justification, that the community might be penetrated by hostile elements and that universality would be diminished.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS BAHAI'S

The current repression against the Baha'is of Iran, both official and unofficial, is the direct outcome of popular attitudes, fostered by clerical hostility and mirroring those held four or five generations ago.

New accusations against Baha'is have in some cases replaced the old ones against Babis, but in most cases they are ultimately based on disapproval by religious orthodoxy and fear of political dissent by the civil authorities. (Today this amounts to much the same thing.) In 1848 the burning questions concerned the Bab's knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and Arabic grammar, today they concern alleged Baha'i collaboration with Zionism and imperialism, but beneath the contemporary veneer lingers the same theological odium. What has happened is that attitudes to the Babis have simply been transferred to the Baha'is, with few Iranians

appreciating how different Baha'ism is from Babism. To a large extent this is the fault of the Baha'is themselves, who after a short period of stressing the very real differences between their faith and Babism have for many years now conflated the two, so that Baha'ism is seen by most Iranians, not unreasonably, as a direct successor to Babism rather than as a new and independent religion.

The common perception of Baha'ism among Iranians can be summed up in two words: *Din nist* - 'It (the Baha'i faith) is not a religion.' This is the most frequent reply if one asks any Iranian today why the Baha'is are being persecuted. It is the reply given by young militants serving as Revolutionary Guards, by conservative bazaar merchants and by many who are disillusioned with or even opposed to the present regime, yet feel obliged to defend practices which they know reflect badly on their country internationally. The latter category of people will often condemn the persecution of ethnic minorities, leftist guerrillas and supporters of the former regime before they express concern for the Baha'is. It is significant that no emigré Iranian politician has so far dared to condemn publicly anti-Baha'i repression, at least in specific terms. Most of them take the view that what is happening to the Baha'is is only one aspect of the arbitrary savagery which occurs so frequently in Iran today. This reticence is clearly based on the fact that the Baha'is are still not a popular cause in Iran.

Nearly every new religion, almost by definition, feels that it is different from and superior to its predecessors. This is as true of Islam, which triumphed over Arab paganism and Zoroastrianism, and bestowed inferior status on Jews and Christians, as it is of Christianity in relation to Judaism, or of the Aryan sun-father faiths that displaced the older moon-mother religions of the ancient Near East. The Baha'i faith is no different. As already noted, Baha'is consider that all the major religions teach universal spiritual principles and that only the social teachings change in accordance with the needs of the age. They see their faith merely as the latest in an unbroken chain of divine revelation, not the first and not the last, but the best-suited to the world today and for the next 1,000 years.

Intolerance of religious minorities has existed, with few exceptions, throughout history, and has only quite recently, and still not universally, been considered abnormal. The successful heresy may sweep all before it, as did Islam, which must have been seen as a heresy by the orthodox Meccans who controlled the profitable pre-Islamic shrines, but unsuccessful heretics - politically, that is - must practise dissimulation or expect persecution, just like individuals who refuse to adopt the new orthodoxy when a whole society is transformed by conquest, religion or revolution. This has been a recurring theme in Iranian history, with the forced conversion or persecution of the defeated common events. Manichees, Mazdakites, Zoroastrians and Babis provide good examples of such intolerance.

To understand why Baha'ism is not perceived by most Iranians as a religion requires some knowledge of Islamic history and dogma. Since the Muslim community was bitterly divided over the question of the succession from the moment of the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632, schism in Islam is almost as old as the religion itself. The resulting Sunni-Shi'a split did not, however, create two religions. All but the most extreme Shi'is have almost always been considered Muslims by mainstream Sunnis, especially if they kept their innermost views to themselves. The minimum requirement of Muslimhood is the profession of faith, belief in a sole God whose messenger was Muhammad, a definition wide enough to embrace a huge diversity of other beliefs. But once a presumed Muslim denies a basic Islamic belief or introduces one that is clearly heretical - such as the Druzes' assertion of the divinity of the Caliph al-Hakim - he is deemed to have left the ranks of Islam and becomes an apostate whose blood may be shed with impunity. The Baha'i belief in evolutionary revelation, for example, does not differ basically from the Islamic belief in *nubuwwa* (prophethood). Muslims believe that God has sent a number of prophets for the guidance of mankind, the first of whom was Adam and the last Muhammad. Baha'is would agree with this, though perhaps not to the specific number of 124,000 prophets accepted by most Muslims, and, as noted, they also recognize a number of prophets denied by Islam. But they do not accept that with Muhammad the 'door of prophethood' was closed for ever. They believe that the Bab succeeded Muhammad as a prophet, or divine manifestation, with the specific mission of preparing the way for Baha'ullah, and that

other prophets will follow, though not for a thousand years. The Babis and early Baha'is did, it seems, consider themselves Muslims in a sense. They could make the profession of faith with a clear conscience. Some early Baha'i converts from the Shi'i clergy kept on their clerical appointments, and 'Abdu'l-Baha, as already noted, prayed every Friday in an 'Akka mosque, although Baha'is now explain that he did so not as a Muslim but to maintain a friendly relationship.

Since there is no universally accepted source of orthodoxy in Islam it is difficult to define heresy, but the nearest equivalent is *bid'a*, literally innovation, and there is no doubt among Muslims, both Shi'is and Sunnis, that the claims to prophethood by the Bab and Baha'ullah put them and their followers beyond the pale of Islam. Since they are seen as being heretical Muslims (they alone of the world religions recognize Muhammad as a prophet, but this, far from helping their cause, actually makes matters worse in Muslim eyes) they cannot claim, in any Muslim community, the protection they might otherwise expect as *dhimmis*, non-Muslims living under Muslim domination. Such status, second-rate but at least safe, is guaranteed under the present Iranian constitution to Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians, all of whom are recognized as religious minorities, even though limitations have been placed on their religious and social practices. The followers of the Baha'i faith, however, are denied such recognition. '*Din nist*', their 'religion' is not a religion.

The question of whether Baha'ism is a separate religion or not therefore lies at the heart of the present crisis. If they were to be considered such they would be in little danger, but at present this seems quite unlikely to happen. There are precedents in Iran for giving recognition to religious minorities theoretically beyond the pale. Zoroastrians are so recognized, although the name by which they are known in Arabic, *zandik*, derived from the Zend language of their scriptures, has come to mean atheist, and they were not initially recognized by Islam as possessors of a divine scripture, like the Jews and Christians. Sikhs, whose religion can be seen as an Islamic heresy, are still active as bazaar traders. Significantly, though, Sikhs are not usually Iranian citizens, even after long residence in Iran, and their religion is not seen as a threat to Islam. Nor, since it is one of the few religions not to welcome proselytes, is Zoroastrianism.

Earlier critics of the Babis and Baha'is took the trouble to list what they regarded as their heresies. E. G. Browne, the British orientalist who wrote so prolifically on the Babis, summarizes¹ an elaborate critique of their faith, written about 1907. The author, Aqa Muhammad Taqi, lists and refutes 30 Babi heresies, some rather obscure. These include Babi attempts to explain away the Koranic statement that Muhammad is the 'Seal of the Prophets', the denial by Babis of the resurrection of the body and of a literal heaven and hell, and their claim that willingness to die for religious beliefs is a proof of truth. An interesting attack on the Baha'i faith was written in the early 1930s by J. R. Richards, a Welsh missionary in Shiraz, who accused Baha'is of distorting their own history. His aim was to provide fellow-missionaries with information about the faith needed for their work. As Richards saw it, Iran 'is slowly coming to the cross-roads where she must face the inevitable choice, Christ or Materialism'. He regarded the Baha'is as a 'movement' spreading 'insidious propaganda', rather than a faith, with no prospects in Iran or elsewhere, while of Shi'a Islam he wrote: 'With the coming of religious freedom its day will draw to a close'².

Despite their particular prejudices, both Aqa Muhammad Taqi and Richards at least took the trouble to read the Baha'i texts they were refuting. Today, not one Iranian in a hundred who denies that the Baha'is have a religion is likely to have studied their beliefs in any depth or from primary sources. This is partly because even under the Pahlavis, a period of relative tolerance for the Iranian Baha'is, the printing, publication and import of Baha'i literature were banned. Baha'i texts did circulate in *samizdat* form, but on nothing like the scale of the equally illegal communist literature.

In examining the theological objections to the Baha'i faith, the Western observer faces what seems an insoluble problem. Brought up in a climate of religious tolerance he wishes to transpose his own liberal views to a society where they are alien. He wants the persecution of Baha'is to end, not just because he is opposed to all religious persecution, but by using the argument that the Baha'is have a religion just as valid, from his point of view, as that of the persecutors. But the argument goes unheeded, since to the religious

establishment in Iran, including the *faqih*, or supreme religious leader referred to in the Constitution, as well as to all other leading Iranian divines, Baha'is are Muslim heretics and as such *mahdur al-damm* (those whose blood may be shed with impunity) unless they recant. They represent a cancer that must be cut out before it can infect the rest of the body. Shi'a Islam regards itself as a minority faith born of repression and injustice, yet sees nothing wrong in applying such standards, on the rare occasions when it has been in a position to do so, to minority faiths it views as dangerous. The more fanatical might even argue that the current persecution of Baha'is reflects a 'liberal' approach, since the number killed to date is still only a tiny fraction of the community's total numbers, all of whom are theoretically *mahdur al-damm*.

Prejudice against the Baha'i faith is not, however, confined to theological disapproval. Serious accusations are also made against the Baha'is, individually and collectively, on political and moral grounds. These accusations are far easier to refute since they are based at best on misunderstandings and oversimplifications and at worst on malicious misinterpretations.

The most serious political charges against the Baha'is are that they cooperated actively with the Shah's regime, and are opposed to the present regime. (It is conveniently forgotten that the first accusation could with equal justice be levelled against the vast majority of Iranians, including many members of the clergy, at least until 1978, and the second against larger numbers than the present regime cares to admit.) This raises the question of whether the Baha'is can be considered a political group. Participation in partisan politics is certainly not permitted among Baha'is, and anyone breaking this rule is liable to expulsion. Put differently, anyone participating in politics would have ceased to be a practising Baha'i by so doing.

Nevertheless, there are some political dimensions to Bahai beliefs. They believe that one day church and state will merge into a 'New World Order', their vision of the perfect political state. But they are urged, both individually and collectively, to avoid what are termed 'political entanglements and subversive activity'. The Baha'is have specific views on what most people call political questions. In several of their official publications the Bahais make clear their opposition to the theoretical basis of communism and socialism, although not to any existing government. They have also adopted clear positions on such issues as racism, nationalism and world government⁵. The Baha'is have, however, always honoured their pledge of loyalty to the government in power, whatever form it has, not only in Iran but wherever they live. There is no evidence whatsoever of Baha'is working for the overthrow of the Khomeini regime, directly or indirectly. Likewise they have scrupulously avoided participating in partisan politics of any kind.

As to the question of whether Baha'is actually cooperated with the Pahlavis there is evidence that some prominent beneficiaries of the regime were Baha'is or had strong Baha'i connections. The Shah's personal physician and close confidant, for example, was a Baha'i, General Ayadi, who was commonly believed to have used his position to advance his co-religionists. Hojjab Yazdani, a rich Baha'i financier with a reputation for questionable business dealings, became extremely unpopular, and the banks he controlled were special targets in the 1978 riots. The long-serving prime minister Amir Abbas Hoveyda had a Baha'i father (who was expelled from the community) and was therefore considered by many Iranians to be a Baha'i or at least to favour Baha'is, even though he considered himself a Muslim. In many cases where Baha'is succeeded through their natural ability and hard work it was thought that their success was at least partly due to their membership of an elitist and semi-secret society, which is how Baha'ism (and freemasonry) have always been seen in Iran. Political power in Iran has almost never been exercised through Western style party organizations, so the fact that Baha'is have never been involved in partisan or parliamentary politics does not prevent them from being seen as a clandestine political group by most Iranians. If anything, Baha'i disclaimers of political involvement serve to confirm this view.

A difficulty here is that according to Islamic theory, or at least practice, the child of a Muslim is deemed to be automatically a Muslim, whereas the Baha'is believe that each individual is responsible from the age of 15 for his own faith. It is also not always clear whether those said to be Baha'is really were. Since Qajar times the accusation of being a Baha'i has been a way of discrediting an enemy. Even if the charge is false some mud is likely

to stick. What matters in Iran today is not so much whether Baha'is as a group actually cooperated with the former regime, but that most Iranians believe they did, while they have no chance to prove the charge false.

Baha'is in fact claim that far from benefiting from the policies of the Pahlavi regime they were discriminated against, being denied the right of seeking employment as Baha'is, from having their marriages recognized, from organizing their own schools, and from publishing or distributing their own religious literature, all serious disabilities that did not apply to most Iranians. They add that in 1975, when Iran officially became a one-party state, Baha'is came under pressure to join the Rastakhiz Party, but almost without exception refused, and were penalized for this lack of cooperation with the regime.

An extension of the accusation that Baha'is were politically involved with the former regime is that they collaborated with Savak, the Shah's secret police organization. Here again, the fact that Baha'is, in conformity with their policy of never attacking government bodies in the countries they live in, failed to condemn the activities of Savak has been used to support this charge, for which no evidence has been published. One basis for the charge might be that Parviz Sabeti, a senior Savak official, came from a Baha'i family, though he neither considered himself nor was considered a member of the faith. Far from collaborating with Savak, Baha'is claim, they actually suffered at their hands, particularly in terms of employment rights, a field in which Savak showed special interest.

Baha'is are also commonly accused of being agents of Zionism and imperialism. Evidence to support the former accusation is that the Baha'i World Centre is in Haifa, Israel, that large numbers of Iranian Baha'is travel (or used to travel) to Israel, and that funds were sent from Iran to Israel. All three facts are true, but the conclusion is false. It has already been seen that Baha'ullah was exiled to what is now Israeli territory (but was then part of the Ottoman Empire), but this was on the orders of two Islamic governments and long before the State of Israel was created. The fact that their main shrines are in the vicinity of Haifa is due to the same historical events, over which Baha'is had no control. They say they are not prepared to relocate their spiritual and administrative centres for short-term expediency, and of course the centre requires contributions from Baha'is all over the world, including Iran, home of one of the largest communities. All these funds, however, are used for Baha'i purposes and have nothing to do with Israeli politics. (Since 1979 the remittance of funds from Iran to Israel has been banned and no Iranians have been permitted to travel to Israel.)

As to the charge that Baha'is are agents of imperialism, or even spies, it has to be remembered that Iran was a victim of semi-colonialism and neo-colonialism for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Iranians are understandably deeply suspicious of foreign influence, which they see in the most unlikely places. Long after Britain ceased to play an active role in Iran's internal affairs, for example, most Iranians continued to see British influence at work. (Some even do today.) The British mandate of Palestine coincided with the formative years of Baha'ism as a world religion, so many Iranians assume a connection. This is reinforced by the fact that 'Abdu'l-Baha received a British knighthood. Similarly, the fact that there is a large Baha'i community in the United States fuels suspicions that the faith is a creation or at least a tool of imperialism. During the Pahlavi period, when nationalism was in vogue, the faith's internationalism provided further grounds for official and unofficial dislike. Similar accusations have also been made against the Episcopal Church in Iran, apparently because of its British connections. Prominent members of that church have suffered severe persecution and even death, yet this cannot strictly be called anti-Christian repression.

The accusation that Baha'is are morally corrupt is widely believed by the Iranian masses. This charge has for years been made by Iranian clerics, and is based on two factors. The first, beyond the control of Baha'is, is that their marriage ceremony has never been recognized in Iran, and since there is no civil marriage either, Baha'is must either deny their religion and be married according to one of the recognized religions, or be married according to their own invalid rite. Most choose the latter, which makes it easy for fanatics to accuse Baha'is of immorality. Baha'i couples who have been married for years are still considered to be living in sin, and

their children illegitimate. Baha'is officiating at marriages can be and have been accused of 'encouraging prostitution', an offence that in itself carries the death penalty. Other aspects of Baha'i practice that have been deliberately misconstrued among uneducated Muslims are that men and women are not segregated in Baha'i gatherings, as they are in Muslim ceremonies, that both sexes serve together on committees, and that Baha'i women do not wear the veil. By the time these facts have been retold a few times many Iranians are ready to believe tales of wild orgies, whereas in fact Baha'i standards of sexual morality are just as high as those of any other religion in Iran.

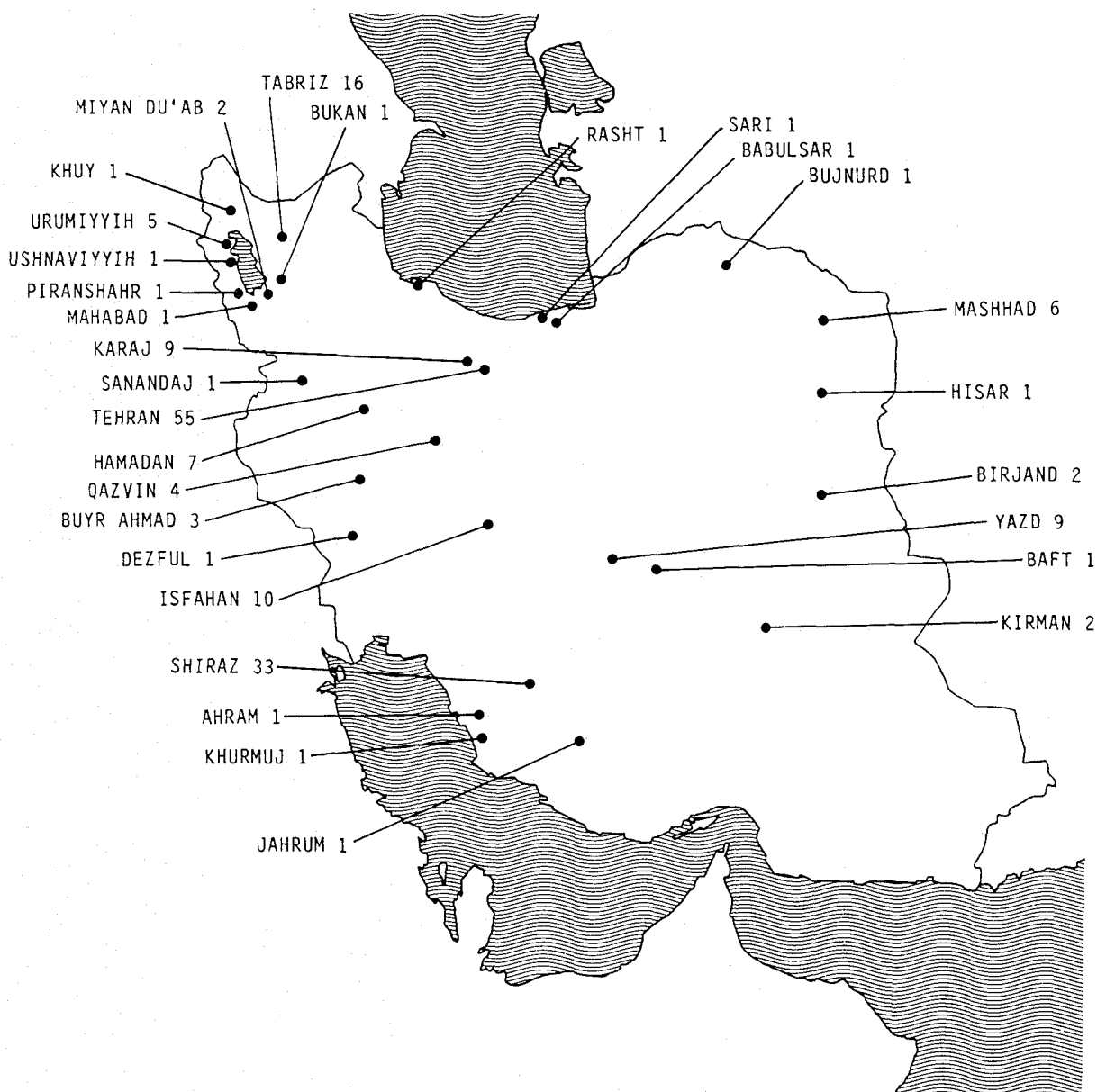
A final reason for anti-Baha'i attitudes, although rarely stated, must be Baha'i opposition to Shi'ism and the Shi'i clergy. 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi were often scathing on these subjects, calling the Shi'is 'the most wretched of sects'⁶ and its leaders 'false, cruel and cowardly',⁷ hardly attitudes likely to endear Baha'is to the religious establishment. Even if such harsh assessments may have been modified in the more tolerant paths the Baha'is have more recently trod they will not have been forgotten by the clergy, even if not publicly expressed.

PERSECUTION OF THE BAHAI'S IN IRAN

Persecution of the Baha'is and their Babi predecessors is as old as the faith itself. In 1845, shortly after proclaiming his mission in Mecca, the Bab returned to Iran, and was almost immediately arrested, remaining in captivity until his execution in 1850. Even before the Bab's death, some 300 of his followers were killed after being besieged by government troops for over six months at Sheikh Tabarsi, a village near the Caspian Sea. They had surrendered under an amnesty that was immediately broken. For the next few years mass killings of Babis continued. Their heroism in the face of death was a major factor, in the opinion of contemporary Western observers, in the spread of the new religion. At least 3,000 Babis are believed to have been killed during the 1848-52 period, often in the most brutal circumstances. The authorities sometimes gave condemned Babis and, later, Baha'is to individual guilds and groups, who vied with each other in devising cruel methods of torture and execution as proof of their loyalty and orthodoxy. Physical violence, including torture and wanton slaughter of Baha'is, has continued with varying intensity ever since. Often the

Baha'is Killed in Iran

August 1978-February 1985



result of instigation by religious leaders or fanatical political groups, the attacks are the most shocking aspect of the current persecution of the Baha'i community, but still only one part of what many see as a co-ordinated campaign of total eradication.

The last two decades of the Qajar period and the intense modernization that characterized the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-41) were relatively peaceful periods for Iranian Baha'is. But even with the introduction of Western-type institutions, such as the secular jurisdiction that replaced the religious courts, they remained second-class citizens. Their schools were closed, their marriages were not recognized and they were forbidden to publish their literature or worship publicly. During this period, and in the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-79), the Baha'is nevertheless flourished, largely because of hard work, self-help, community spirit and emphasis on education.

Their most serious set-back occurred in 1955, shortly after the coup d'état that overthrew the Mosaddeq regime. Stirred up by the fanatical Shaikh Falsafi, whose incitements to take action against these 'enemies of Islam' were broadcast by the state radio, mobs attacked Baha'i property, desecrating cemeteries, looting shops and houses, and destroying crops and livestock. The motivation for this policy appears to have been a concession by a rather uncertain new regime towards the conservative religious groups whose support was felt vital to the monarchy's survival.

Intensive lobbying by Baha'i groups in Europe and the United States, particularly through the United Nations and in intellectual circles, proved effective, however, and before long the Iranian government called a halt to the repression, in which police, army and government personnel had participated. Much damage had in the meantime been done, not just in material terms, serious though that was, but by reviving suspicions and prejudices that had long lain dormant. As a result, anti-Baha'i feeling, which had been slowly receding, was resuscitated in the younger generation.

During the latter years of the Shah's reign, even during the so-called liberalization period, Baha'is continued to be denied many of those rights which the government, having adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was committed to uphold. They were deprived of the right of equality in employment, since Baha'is were barred from a wide range of government jobs, to publish and distribute their religious literature and to worship openly. Documentary evidence exists that the Society for Propagation of Islam, an extreme fundamentalist group, sought the cooperation of Savak in attacking the Baha'i community systematically. Savak tacitly agreed, but ordered that 'provocation and disturbance' should be avoided. Ironically, the Society, which was led for some time by Mohammad Ali Raja'i, later prime minister and president of the Islamic Republic, has itself accused the Baha'is of collaboration with Savak.

But the harassment and social stigma that were fomented by religious extremists in the period up to 1978 were minor irritations compared with what has happened to the community in the past four years. There is clear evidence that the authorities are condoning and in some cases initiating the terror and repression against Baha'is, involving physical violence, imprisonment, economic sanctions and other pressures that have already caused widespread suffering. Although it is difficult in today's circumstances to obtain independent confirmation of the hundreds of cases of persecution their authenticity is not seriously at issue. The government, far from denying the allegations, instead defends its actions, and inactions, in a variety of other ways.

It is not the purpose of this report to provide a detailed account of this persecution, which has been amply recorded by the Baha'is themselves⁸. Nevertheless, it is clearly essential to examine here the various forms it has taken and the scale on which it has been practised. Despite some measure of isolated and opportunist violence, as well as personal greed, the similar circumstances of different cases and particularly the annihilation of the community's leadership, make what is happening look increasingly like a coordinated plan. Even if it is not, and the evidence is inconclusive, the result is the same: a green light for fanatics to practise pogroms and harassment, which are placing immense pressure on Baha'is to recant their faith and convert (or 'return', as most Iranians would see it) to Islam.

Attacks on the Leadership

The Baha'i community in Iran is administered, like its counterparts in other countries, by a National Spiritual Assembly, elected by delegates from some 500 Local Spiritual Assemblies throughout the land. All these assemblies consist of nine members elected by secret ballot. In addition, there are specialized advisory committees appointed by the assemblies. These 5,000-odd men and women, who serve in an honorary capacity as a religious duty, form what can loosely be called the leadership of the community. They are the chief targets for what appears to be a campaign of arrest, execution and disappearance that has been going on since the Revolution.

Four serious cases involving collective groups of Baha'i leaders have been reported to date. The first was the disappearance, in August 1980, of the entire National Spiritual Assembly, eight men and one woman, together with two appointed officials. They were arrested by men purporting to be Revolutionary Guardsmen, but the Government has issued conflicting statements about their subsequent fate. It was originally said that they were undergoing interrogation on suspicion of involvement in an anti-state plot⁹. A rumour was later spread that they had been smuggled out of the country, but their families have heard nothing from them. The President of the Supreme Court, Ayatollah Musavi Ardabili, has denied that they have been executed, but 18 months after their disappearance their whereabouts are unknown.

In March 1981 two members of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Shiraz were executed on vague charges of collaborating with Zionism and Savak, as well as with having been members of the Baha'i administration, the first time such a charge was formally referred to as a capital offence¹⁰. Next, the members elected to replace the missing national leaders were arrested and executed, at the end of 1981, and on 1 January 1982, six members of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Tehran were also shot, together with the woman in whose house they were meeting¹¹.

Ayatollah Ardabili promptly denied that the leaders had been executed because of their faith, saying 'Nobody in Iran is executed for his religion or beliefs. These people had been found guilty of spying for foreign countries.'¹² But as in so many cases of trials by revolutionary courts in Iran no evidence was published to support this allegation. The Shiraz court stated that the condemned men 'had contacts with Baitulmal' (literally 'treasury') 'in Haifa, the espionage centre of Zionism in Israel, and had made cash contributions and had received written appreciations from there'¹³. an apparent reference to the routine sending of contributions by Iranian Baha'is, before the Revolution, to the faith's headquarters, and quite unconnected with espionage in the accepted sense. It may be assumed, in the absence of any other evidence, that Ayatollah Ardabili's claim is based on similar facts. In cases where formal charges were made, Baha'i defendants are reported to have been offered their lives, liberty, return of property or reinstatement in employment on condition that they recant their faith, an apparent contradiction of official claims that Baha'is have only been tried for criminal offences¹⁴.

The community feels that these attacks on their leaders provide frightening precedents for the 5,000 Baha'is still serving in similar local capacities. By January 1982 a total of 97 Baha'is were known to have been killed since the start of the Revolution, almost all of them actively involved in the administration of the community¹⁵. In addition, some 150 prominent Baha'is are believed to be in prison.

Among those killed simply for being Baha'is was Dr Manuchehr Hakim, an internationally known anatomist who was assassinated in his clinic¹⁶. One of the more gruesome cases was of an elderly couple who died slow deaths after masked men had set fire to them in a remote village, and several cases of mob lynchings, stonings and deaths involving torture have been reported¹⁷.

In no instance have the authorities taken action against the murderers of Baha'is, and investigations are perfunctory.

Economic Persecution

In addition to actual physical violence and the effect that this has had on intimidating other members of the community, particularly those most vulnerable because of their membership of the Baha'i administration, sustained economic pressures have been imposed

on individual Baha'is and the community in general. In monetary terms the losses resulting from theft, destruction and confiscation of property already amount to tens of millions of dollars, and the goal appears to be the complete bankruptcy of all Baha'i economic endeavour, both individual and collective.

Although much of the loss consists of senseless destruction, such as the burning of orchards and crops, and the wrecking of homes and business premises, Baha'is have also suffered from theft apparently motivated by personal greed. The property of executed Baha'is has sometimes been confiscated even when no court order was given, depriving dependants of homes and livelihoods. Shops and farms have been looted, armed groups claiming to be Revolutionary Guards or local *komitehs* on official business have taken valuables from individuals and mulcted rich Baha'is in the name of official organs of the Islamic Republic. Police and other authorities have failed to take action in such cases.

But perhaps more serious in the long-term than these acts against individuals has been the official policy of confiscating all property belonging to Baha'is collectively. Two corporate bodies have been most affected, the Nownahalan Company and the Omana Company. The Nownahalan (literally 'saplings', hence youngsters) was founded as a children's thrift club in 1917. It gradually grew into a large-scale enterprise with a capital of some \$5 million, engaged in imports, housing loans, industrial investment and retailing. Despite its basically commercial orientation, the Nownahalan Company carries out a wide range of non-profit and charitable activities, providing student loans and assistance to the elderly and distressed. The Omana (literally 'trustees') Company is a holding company in which ownership of about 1,000 Baha'i properties, including shrines, local centres, cemeteries and welfare facilities is vested. The assets of both companies have been confiscated and their records seized, thus wiping out the savings and pensions of some 15,000 Baha'is and providing a 'legal' basis for the confiscation of property.

In addition to the confiscation and occupation of Baha'i communal property there has been widespread destruction, including that of the single most holy Baha'i shrine in the country, the House of the Bab, which has been compared in terms of sanctity for Baha'is with that of the Ka'ba in Mecca for Muslims. In September 1979 a crowd, accompanied by 25 Revolutionary Guards, attacked the building, apparently under the clergyman in charge of the local religious endowments department¹⁸. This was in breach of assurances that the property had been taken over for its own protection. Other holy places and Baha'i cemeteries have been destroyed or vandalized, and in many localities there is now nowhere for the Baha'is to bury their dead.

Another form of economic persecution that Baha'is have suffered is in the employment field. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of Baha'is employed by the state, a broader category of employment than in most non-Socialist states, since education, health and banking are now entirely in the public sector, have been dismissed from their jobs, while retired personnel have had their pensions cut off.

In June 1980 the influential Ayatollah Saduqi issued an order that Baha'is in government service should be 'instantly removed from their desks and handed over to the revolutionary courts'. Even before this, there were instances of instructions given to individual government agencies to 'purge' themselves of Baha'i employees. While acting minister of education, the late Mohammad 'Ali Raja'i, who was elected president in 1981, personally signed orders dismissing all Baha'is from employment as teachers, which he termed as 'a minimum punishment'. The maximum punishment, he continued, would 'befall those who employed you, who will be tried in the Islamic Revolutionary Court'. Baha'is who received government grants as students or trainees in the fields of education and health, were ordered to repay such sums. The question of repayment of salaries was said to be under consideration. In the economic collapse that has occurred since the Revolution there is little likelihood of such dismissed personnel finding alternative employment.

Political and Administrative Persecution

In addition to the physical and economic persecution described above, the Baha'i community in Iran suffers from being denied recognition as a religious minority, although it is the largest such

minority¹⁹. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran was drafted by a Council of Experts in 1979 and adopted by a referendum in December of that year. It provides official recognition to four religions: Islam (including Sunni Islam), Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism. All civil rights stem from the Constitution, which by denying recognition to the Baha'is in effect denies them full citizenship. Since many aspects of personal status and law are now governed exclusively by religious law this places Baha'is in an invidious position: having to choose between denying their faith or breaking the law. All marriages in Iran, for example, must be performed according to religious law and are not recognized for civil purposes until an official religious ceremony has been completed. A Baha'i cannot therefore be legally married according to the rites of his or her religion, and any children born to such a marriage are deemed illegitimate.

This is not a new situation for the Baha'is. They were not recognized as a religious community by the 1906 Constitution, so theoretically did not enjoy full civil rights during the period of Pahlavi rule (1921-79). Nevertheless, this lack of recognition was not a serious disability. They were permitted in practice to leave unanswered any official question regarding their religion, and this device enabled thousands of Baha'is to be employed by the state in contradiction to the letter of the law, which restricted such employment to adherents of the four official religions. They could also obtain identity cards, passports, driving licences and other official permits without difficulty, and could enrol in any state educational institution. Unlike the other religious minorities, however, they were not allowed to have schools of their own, although until 1934 they had pioneered education, open to all, in many parts of the country.

The full effect of the new Constitution on individual Baha'is is not yet clear. In August 1981, for example, instructions were given by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs responsible for cultural and consular matters that Iranian consulates should not renew the passports of Baha'is but instead issue them with travel documents valid only for return to Iran²⁰. The text of these instructions, described as 'highly confidential' and 'urgent', has been published and appears to be genuine, but it is not yet clear to what extent they are enforceable or being enforced, especially since they also included a vague ban on the renewal of passports issued to what are termed 'so-called students'. No guidelines were apparently provided and it is possible that the official who issued the instructions may have been more concerned with his own domestic image than with formulating new policy.

One report says that registration for new identity cards will take place in the current Iranian year and Baha'is will not be eligible for registration unless they claim to be members of one of the four official religions²¹. If this happens, it will mean that Baha'is will not be able to transfer property, open bank accounts, travel abroad (or inside Iran by air), obtain most kinds of employment, receive a formal education, run a business, or carry out any other acts for which possession of an identity card is obligatory. The lack of an identity card would also make it difficult for Baha'is to obtain basic foodstuffs and fuels, many of which are now rationed. It is reliably reported that Baha'i children were denied admission to the state school system for the 1981-82 academic year unless they made a formal conversion to Islam or one of the other official religions. Needless to say, the Baha'is are not now permitted to hold public meetings, express their faith openly or publish their literature, and attempts to do so are rigorously suppressed.

Coupled with this official policy of denying Baha'is civil rights is a campaign of vilification through the state-controlled media. Baha'is are described as 'ruthless', 'traitorous', 'detested', 'agents of Zionism', 'corrupt', 'an ugly sect', and so on. This campaign undoubtedly contributes to the growing stigma attached to the Baha'i faith among millions of ordinary Iranians, and provides the necessary social background for such persecution. Before the Revolution some mullas used their pulpits to attack Baha'is (and to a lesser extent Jews), but today the campaign is on a far more intensive and effective scale.

The Constitution created the office of *faqih*, a supreme religious leader who is the judge of final appeal on almost every question affecting national life. Although it has not formally been stated, the incumbent of this office is undoubtedly Ayatollah Khomeini, so his attitude to Baha'is is clearly of the greatest importance to the moulding of public opinion. The Ayatollah does not appear to have

pronounced on the Baha'i question in depth since his assumption of this office, but he is known to be totally opposed to them. In an interview given shortly before his return to Iran in 1979 he promised full respect for the religious minorities, saying that Islam 'will have a humanistic attitude and relations with them and there should be no reason to fear'. But later in the interview, when questioned specifically about the Baha'is, he said, 'They are a political faction: they are harmful: they will not be accepted.'²² This sums up the official attitude towards them, which is unlikely to change as long as Ayatollah Khomeini remains as Iran's religious-political leader (for these two aspects of his influence are now inextricably linked).

INTERNATIONAL REACTION

The evidence to support a claim that the Iranian government is in gross violation of the human rights of its Baha'is citizens is extremely strong. Among the national and international bodies that have passed resolutions or recommendations calling on the Iranian government, often in strong terms, to end such violations, are the European Parliament, the United Nations Human Rights Sub-Commission, the Canadian and Federal German Parliaments, and the Australian Senate. In January 1982 the Council of Europe adopted a resolution calling on member states 'to use every available opportunity . . . to convince the Iranian authorities of the need to respect internationally accepted human rights standards'.

Meeting in Geneva in September 1981, the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities adopted a resolution, by 19 votes to none, with five abstentions, in which it expressed its conviction that what it called the 'systematic persecution of the Baha'is in Iran' was 'motivated by religious intolerance and a desire to eliminate the Baha'i Faith from the land of its birth'. The resolution further expressed concern that the Iranian Government appeared to have ignored all previous approaches regarding the Baha'is, as well as concern for the 'perilous situation facing this community'.²³ Resolutions by the other bodies are along similar lines.

What response does the Iranian Government make when challenged by international public opinion? The commonest is to deny that any oppression has taken or is taking place, and to insist that 'the only Baha'is to be prosecuted and sentenced are those who have been involved in acts of espionage and other activities contrary to the higher interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran'²⁴. Counter-charges are frequently added such as claims that Baha'is cooperated with the Shah's government 'to oppress the people and plunder our country's wealth'²⁵. The Baha'i faith is stated to be 'not a religion but an ideology created by colonial powers to help the past illegitimate government of Iran in their oppressions of the brave people of Iran'²⁶. Evidence is rarely given to substantiate these accusations, and when it is it tends to be distorted, such as the claim that Hoveyda was a Baha'i²⁷. Another argument used is that acts of violence, such as the destruction in 1979 of the House of the Bab in Shiraz, have been the work of 'unruly mobs'²⁸ (although their lack of discipline is justified). It has also been stated, less frequently, that the community is too small to deserve separate legal status. The blanket denial is sometimes accompanied by what seems to Western ears as an irrelevancy, as when the Iranian representative at the UN, replying to a statement on the plight of the Baha'is made on behalf of the 10 member-states of the European Community, said 'No single Baha'i has been sued, put to trial or persecuted in Iran,' then added that the Shah's purchase of unsold British automobiles in the mid-1970's had saved the United Kingdom from economic crisis²⁹.

CONCLUSION

As must by now have been established, the question of the persecution of the Baha'is is a complex one. Apart from the matter of motivation, there is not even general agreement among observers as to whether what is happening amounts to official policy, except perhaps the dismissal of Baha'is employed in government agencies, which was also against the laws of the previous regime. Some feel that it is rather the work of individual fanatics, and not a coordinated and systematic campaign, such as, say, the massacre

of 1.5 million Armenians in Ottoman Turkey during the First World War, or Hitler's slaughter of European Jews. The disappearance of the Baha'i national leaders, for example, could have been the work of an anti-Baha'i group taking the law into their own hands, as was the case with the murders of Episcopalians in 1980. Those who speak of genocide should remember that even at its highest estimate the number of Baha'is killed is only a tiny fraction of the whole community, though none the more excusable for that. It is also worth noting that despite his reputation for outspokenness Ayatollah Khomeini has not personally made any inflammatory anti-Baha'i remarks since his return to Iran, as he has done in the case of Kurds, Americans and the Mojahedin. Nor has any theologian openly stated that Baha'i blood may freely be shed. It has certainly suited the regime to have a convenient domestic scapegoat like the Baha'is, and once a free rein has been given to persecution it is difficult to stop it. There are perhaps parallels here with the seizure of the US hostages, which began as an unofficial endeavour, then won such popular support that the government found it difficult to end the crisis, even though many leading officials were totally opposed to it. Constitutional provisions such as the right to a fair trial and freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention are not always observed, and there is a great deal of unofficial decision-making, including administrative and judicial acts affecting life and property, over which the nominal authorities cannot or do not care to exercise control.

So is international action on the Baha'i question likely to be ineffective or even counter-productive? Certainly circumstances were quite different in 1955 when world opinion forced the Shah's government, then heavily dependent on the West, to end anti-Baha'i repression. Today no foreign government, even Iran's few radical allies, have any real influence in Tehran, as was seen recently over efforts to mediate in the war with Iraq. Countries with a large Muslim population, even where the government is secular, are unlikely to seek involvement on behalf of what many of their citizens regard as a heretical and threatening offshoot of Islam. Nor are the socialist countries likely to bother unduly about the plight of a religious group ideologically far removed from and even hostile to theirs. Even those most concerned about the Baha'is, the West and many Third World countries, some with active and useful Baha'i communities of their own, must doubt whether there is much they can do. In the case of the US hostages they found they could do little.

Perhaps the most hopeful avenue is indicated by the evidence, scanty though it is, that Iran has been embarrassed by international reaction to the plight of the Baha'is during the past year, as also seems to have been the case over the wholesale slaughter of supporters of the Mojahedin, which has subsided, though not ceased, in recent months. One sign of this is that the publicity which used to accompany the execution of Baha'is has died down, a possible indication that the authorities have begun to realize the harm this is doing to their image. The Baha'is in Tehran have received semi-official hints to try to discourage the attention the persecution has been receiving abroad, and Iranian diplomatic representatives have been put on the defensive at a time when they wish to win sympathy over the Iraqi invasion. Even denials that anything untoward is happening must be seen as a tentative step in the right direction, particularly as Iran seems anxious to end its near-isolation from the international community.

Groups concerned with discrimination against minorities, and the Baha'is themselves, do feel that the right kind of collective protest can help. Expressed through the UN Commission on Human Rights, or the General Assembly, they feel, widespread moral disapproval of what is happening, whether this is officially sanctioned or not, could make the authorities in Tehran curb the more fanatically anti-Baha'i elements. This seems a more hopeful approach than that of direct diplomacy, which the potentially influential EEC countries do not believe would be effective. A firm statement by the UN Secretary-General, or the appointment of a commission of enquiry or a special rapporteur, might well be denounced publicly in Iran as interference in an internal matter, but it could nevertheless have useful behind-the-scenes effects. The inaccurate near-hysterical denunciations that have appeared in some Western publications almost certainly do more harm than good. Iran is unlikely to change any policy in apparent reaction to outside pressures, even from the UN, so great tact and understanding are necessary. The lesson to be learned from the hostage crisis is that patient negotiating, however frustrating at times, is more

effective than direct political or military action, and this still applies to any dispute with Iran. An essential ingredient for success is the effort to understand the Iranian point of view, however alien it may appear.

If the present leaders in Iran are to be convinced that what is happening to the Baha'is is wrong, it is more likely to be by arguments such as that they should not feel threatened by a community that represents less than one per cent of the total population, or that the repression is counter-productive because of the sympathy for the Baha'is it creates abroad and possibly in Iran. After all, it was largely persecution of the Babis by the Qajars that made Baha'ism the largest religious minority in a country where martyrdom has always been held in the highest esteem. But on even the most optimistic view there is unlikely to be an end to discrimination against the Baha'is of Iran in the foreseeable future. Prejudice seems still to be so deep-rooted that it may take more than a generation before the Baha'is can be assimilated into their native land, for it is just as much theirs, with the rights guaranteed them by the Universal Declaration. Although the best that can realistically be hoped for is the removal of the grosser elements of the present persecution, pessimism about the prospects should not deter efforts to end it completely.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

Recent events: 1982-1985

In the three years since the publication of the first edition of this report the persecution of the Baha'is has continued unabated: the campaign against them has become increasingly systematic and their situation has steadily deteriorated. The official nature of the persecution, as attested by the anti-Baha'i edicts and regulations promulgated by the central government, as well as by the rulings handed down by Iran's highest courts, is now beyond dispute.

The plight of the Baha'is has attracted an ever-growing number of international protests and appeals, which reached a peak in June 1983 following the mass execution in Shiraz of seventeen Baha'is, including seven women and three teenage girls, who were hanged when they refused to recant their faith. Earlier that same year, the chief religious judge and President of the Revolutionary Court of Shiraz, Hojjatol-Islam Qazai, had issued a warning, quoted in the 22 February issue of the newspaper *Khabar-i-Junub*, that: 'Before it is too late, the Baha'is should recant Baha'ism, which is condemned by reason and logic. Otherwise, the day will soon come when the Islamic nation will deal with the Baha'is in accordance with its religious obligations, as it has dealt with other hypocrites who have appeared in more dangerous garb and have satanic religious gatherings.'

Some of the Baha'i prisoners in Shiraz, both male and female, were tortured prior to their execution and other incidents were reported in which torture was used to try to force Baha'is to recant their faith and embrace Islam. During the latter half of 1983, the emphasis shifted and torture began to be applied systematically, with a view to obtaining confessions rather than recantations. The torture escalated dramatically during 1984 and still continues. The purpose of the torture, which is directed principally against prominent Baha'i prisoners, is to extract from the victim a videotaped confession that he is a spy and that the whole structure of the Baha'i Faith in Iran is a network of espionage. Despite the significant number of Baha'is known to have undergone severe and sustained torture, the authorities have apparently failed to obtain a satisfactory 'confession' and are now exploring new ways of forcing Baha'is to incriminate themselves. In January 1985, it was reported that, as a condition of their release from prison, Baha'i detainees were being required to sign a statement identifying themselves as members of the 'misguided, Zionist, espionage group of Baha'is' and undertaking that, if any article relating to the Baha'i Faith were to be found on their persons or in their homes, they could be regarded as 'warring against God' - an offence which, under Iran's present régime, is punishable by death. For obvious reasons, Baha'i detainees have refused to sign the form.

The incidence of summary executions of Baha'is, which reached a high of 46 in 1981, declined in the succeeding years: there were 26 executions in 1982, 24 in 1983 and 22 in 1984. In contrast, and

coinciding with the introduction of the systematic campaign of torture, there was a sudden outbreak of unexplained deaths in prison, with 11 Baha'is dying in detention between mid-1983 and the end of 1984. Assassinations and mob violence accounted for the loss of 5 Baha'i lives during 1982 and 1983. It was announced in August 1984 that 32 Baha'is had had sentences of death pronounced against them. Despite interventions by the United Nations and by individual governments, eight of the condemned have since been executed. According to the Baha'i International Community, the total number of Baha'is killed for their religious beliefs since the start of the Islamic Revolution now stands at 195*. This figure includes the 14 prominent Baha'is (including the entire membership of the elected national governing body of the Baha'i Faith in Iran) who disappeared following their arrest in August 1980 and who are now presumed dead.

On 29 August 1983, the Iranian Attorney-General formally announced a ban on all the administrative and community activities of the Baha'i Faith in Iran and declared membership in a Baha'i administrative institution to be a criminal offence. In accordance with the fundamental Baha'i principle of obedience to government, all Baha'i administrative institutions in Iran (the national governing body and approximately 400 local administrative bodies) were immediately disbanded - a move which deprived the clergyless Baha'i community of the institutions necessary for the proper practice of the Baha'i religion, as well as for the conduct of its spiritual, social and humanitarian activities. Despite this, and in defiance of article 15 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which provides that criminal laws may not be applied retroactively, the authorities immediately embarked upon an unprecedentedly large-scale campaign of mass arrests of Baha'is who had formerly served as members of Baha'i administrative institutions. Hundreds of men and women, and sometimes also their infant children, were summarily detained. The number of Baha'is currently being held without charges in Iranian prisons is reported by the Baha'i International Community to be in excess of 700.

Other pressures on the Baha'is continued to include harassment, physical abuse, confiscation of property, denial of education and deprivation of means of livelihood. By July 1982, all Baha'is employed by the government (including doctors, nurses and teachers) had been dismissed from their jobs and the pensions of all retired Baha'i civil servants had been terminated. Early in 1985, it was announced that the Attorney-General was issuing summonses against former Baha'i civil servants, demanding that they repay to the Government the salaries received during the entire period of their employment, or face imprisonment. Many Baha'is have recently been imprisoned because of their failure to comply with this demand.

Despite strong evidence to the contrary, the Government of Iran has consistently denied that any religious persecution is taking place in Iran and has sought to justify its activities against the Baha'i community by promulgating oral and written charges to the effect that the Baha'i Faith is a politically-motivated, Western-backed, pro-Zionist espionage organization. These and other charges appeared in a document entitled *Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran - A Review of the Facts*, which was circulated by the Iranian delegation to the Third Committee of the 37th UN General Assembly in November 1982. A later publication, entitled *Baha'ism - its origins and its role*, which was distributed at the 36th session of the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in August 1983, repeated the same charges and also sought to prove that the Baha'i Faith owed its very existence to the activities of a Russian spy masquerading as a mullah. A further document, consisting largely of extracts from the two previous ones, was circulated by the Iranian delegation to the 37th Sub-Commission

* Baha'is killed for their religious beliefs from the start of the Islamic Revolution (late 1978) to mid-March 1985:

Summarily executed	141
Died in prison	13
Assassinated	5
Beaten, stoned or burned to death by mobs	22
Disappeared and presumed dead	14
Total:	195

Baha'is held in prison without charges as at mid-March 1985: approx. 700

and reappeared, inappropriately, at the UN Seminar on the Encouragement of Understanding, Tolerance and Respect in Matters Relating to Freedom of Religion or Belief, held in Geneva in December 1984. The Baha'i International Community has prepared and circulated commentaries rebutting the charges contained in these documents and drawing attention to the fanciful and self-contradictory arguments they contain.

The human rights organs of the United Nations and other intergovernmental organizations have continued to keep the Baha'i case on their agendas. On 10 March 1983, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling on the Iranian Government to suspend the death sentences pronounced against 22 Baha'is in Shiraz. The European Parliament adopted a further resolution on 7 July 1983, 'repudiating the claim by the Government of Iran that the Baha'is are a political party' and condemning the execution of Baha'i women and girls in Shiraz as 'the product of unspeakable fanaticism'. At each of its annual sessions in 1982, 1983 and 1984, the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities adopted a resolution expressing its grave concern at the continuing reports of grave violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and mentioning specifically the persecution of the Baha'i minority. At its annual session in 1983, the UN Commission on Human Rights, the parent body of the Sub-Commission, adopted a resolution on the human rights situation in Iran in which it expressed, inter alia, its 'profound concern' at the religious persecution of the Baha'is. The Commission expressed identical sentiments in the resolution it adopted the following year and - acting on a recommendation from the Sub-Commission - decided to request its Chairman to appoint a Special Representative to 'establish contacts with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran and to make a thorough study of the human rights situation in that country'. This decision was subsequently approved by the Economic and Social Council and the appointment of Mr. Andrés Aguilar of Venezuela as Special Representative was announced in October 1984.

In his preliminary report to the 41st Commission on Human Rights early in 1985, the Special Representative expressed his great concern at the number and gravity of alleged violations of human rights in Iran. He reported that he had so far received no reply from the Government of Iran in response to his requests for its cooperation in enabling him to carry out his mandate. Acutely concerned at the situation, the Commission adopted a resolution in which it requested its Special Representative '... to present an interim report to the General Assembly at its fortieth [1985] session on the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran, including the situation of minority groups such as the Baha'is...'. The significance of this resolution, and of the specific mention of the Baha'is, lies in the fact that, throughout the entire history of the United Nations, only three countries - Chile, El Salvador and Guatemala - have been previously placed on the agenda of the General Assembly specifically because of the severity and extent of their human rights violations.

The authorities in Teheran have so far demonstrated an unwillingness to respond positively to any of the approaches made to them concerning human rights violations in general and the situation of the Baha'is in particular. When, in compliance with its obligations as a State party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Government of Iran presented its periodic report to the

Human Rights Committee - the body of independent experts responsible for monitoring compliance with the Covenant - it submitted an extremely scanty report which consisted almost entirely of revolutionary principles and failed to address any of the matters that were of concern to the Committee. During the course of their July 1982 dialogue with the Committee, the representatives of Iran proclaimed Iran's innocence of any human rights violations, protested bitterly when Committee members raised questions concerning the Baha'is, and earned a stern rebuke from the Chairman for attacking the bona fides of individual Committee members - an occurrence without precedent in the history of the Committee.

Iran's attitude towards its obligations under international human rights instruments was recently clarified by its United Nations Ambassador, Said Rajaie-Khorassani, who, in a statement to the Third Committee of the 39th General Assembly on 7 December 1984, attacked the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its dependent Covenants on the grounds that they were secular instruments deriving from the Judaeo-Christian tradition and, as such, could not be implemented by Muslims. He stated that his country would not hesitate to violate the provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, since it had to choose between violating the divine law of the country and violating secular conventions. He added that, although it condemned torture, the Islamic Republic of Iran believed that corporal punishment and the death penalty did not fall within the category of torture when carried out on the basis of Islam in accordance with a sentence by an Islamic court.¹¹

The Special Representative on Iran addressed this argument in his report to the 41st Commission. He pointed out that 'States of all political, economic, social, cultural and religious persuasions participated in the drafting of the [United Nations] Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights', added that 'States of all religious, cultural or ideological persuasions cooperate in the implementation of universal standards of human rights in their respective countries' and concluded that 'no State can claim to be allowed to disrespect basic, entrenched rights such as the right to life, freedom from torture, freedom of thought, conscience and religion... on the ground that departure from these standards might be permitted under national or religious law.'

Appendix

BAHA'I STATISTICS WORLDWIDE as at March 1985

Independent countries in which the Baha'i Faith is established:	166
Dependent territories in which the Baha'i Faith is established:	41
Total	207
Number of National Spiritual Assemblies:	143
Number of Local Spiritual Assemblies:	29,720
Number of tribes and ethnic groups represented in the Baha'i world community:	2,110
Number of languages into which Baha'i literature has been translated:	740

- ¹ This summary is based mainly on A. Bausani 'Baha'is' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd ed., Leiden, 1960-) pp. 916-918, *Principles of Baha'i Administration* (3rd ed., London, 1973), Mary Perkins and Philip Hainsworth *The Baha'i Faith* (London, 1980) and John Huddleston *The Earth is But One Country* (London, 1976).
- ² Women do not in fact have full equality with men. In cases of intestacy they receive a smaller share of an inheritance, and a woman's possessions are deemed to belong to her husband unless she can show that he has given them to her absolutely. Women are not eligible for election to the Universal House of Justice, although they can be elected at the local and national level. 'Abdu'l-Baha stated that the reason why women were excluded from the highest Baha'i congress would one day become apparent.
- ³ E.G. Browne, *Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion* (Cambridge, 1918) pp. 323-339.
- ⁴ J.R. Richards, *The Religion of the Baha'is* (London, 1932) pp. 225-227.
- ⁵ Dr Denis MacEoin in a private communication on Bahai political beliefs.
- ⁶ *Ma'ida-yi Asmani* (Tehran, 1971-3) vol. 7 p. 182.
- ⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come* (Wilmette, 1939) pp. 93-8.
- ⁸ The most complete account is *The Baha'is in Iran, A Report on the Persecution of a Religious Minority*, published by the United Nations Office of the Baha'i International Community (New York, June 1981, revised and updated July 1982) and its update headed 'Major Developments July 1982-July 1983' (New York, July 1983). The Baha'is also publish press releases dealing with individual cases of persecution. In most cases the allegations are supported by documentary evidence such as facsimiles of official letters and newspaper reports.
- ⁹ *The Times* (quoting Reuter), 9 January 1982.
- ¹⁰ *The Baha'is in Iran*, p. 5.
- ¹¹ *The Times*, loc. cit.
- ¹² *International Herald Tribune* (quoting Reuter), 8 January 1982.
- ¹³ *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, 18 March 1981.
- ¹⁴ *The Baha'is in Iran*, p. 10.
- ¹⁵ *The Times*, loc. cit.
- ¹⁶ *The Baha'is in Iran*, p. 10.
- ¹⁷ *Chronological Summary of Individual Acts of Persecution against Baha'is in Iran* published by the Baha'i International Community (New York, June 1981) p. 22.
- ¹⁸ *The Baha'is in Iran*, p. 8.
- ¹⁹ Most estimates put the number of Baha'is in Iran immediately before the Revolution at about 300,000 (though some observers consider this too high. This compares with estimates of slightly under 300,000 for Christians (mainly Armenians and Assyrians), about 60,000 Jews and 20,000 Zoroastrians. All four communities have probably since declined because of emigration during and since the Revolution. It is believed that the Baha'is have been the largest religious minority in Iran since the beginning of this century.
- ²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs circular dated 12 August 1981, sent to all Iranian consulates, facsimile published in *The Baha'i Faith, Persecution in Iran*, published by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United Kingdom (London, 25 November 1981) p. 2.
- ²¹ *Sunday Times*, article by Rosemary Righter, 20 September 1981.
- ²² *Seven Days* 23 February 1979, pp. 19-20.
- ²³ ECOSOC E/CN4/Sub 2/L778, 2 September 1981.
- ²⁴ Statement by Ayatollah Mahdavi Kani, quoted in Note Verbale of the Iranian Mission to the UN, Geneva, 22 September 1981.
- ²⁵ Letter from the Iranian chargé d'affaires to an unnamed British MP dated 24 June 1981, quoted in *The Baha'i Faith*.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid. (See also p. 10 supra on this question.)
- ²⁸ Undated statement issued by the Iranian Embassy in London, summer 1981.
- ²⁹ United Nations, 36th General Assembly GA/SHC/2453 dated 29 October 1981.
- ³⁰ *Sunday Times*, 11 July 1982.
- ³¹ The remarks attributed to Ambassador Rajaie-Khorassani have been taken from the Summary Record of the 65th meeting of the Third Committee of the 39th General Assembly.

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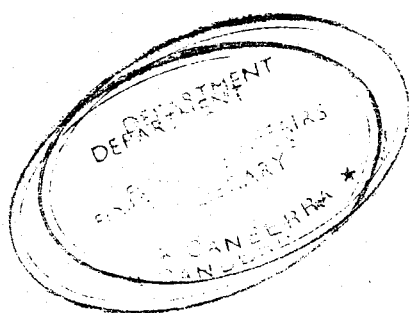
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