

10 The Baha'i community of Iran

Cultural genocide and resilience

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Introduction

The events described in this chapter represent almost an inversion of what is usually considered the typical example of cultural genocide. Typically, a modern culture attempts to obliterate a traditional culture, while representing its actions as being necessary to bring about progress and modernity (examples include what occurred to native peoples in most of the Americas as well as the Aboriginal population of Australia). In tracing the history of the Baha'i community of Iran, however, we find that over a period of more than 100 years, a religious community that has represented modernity and a global vision has been persecuted and culturally suppressed by the religious establishment and successive governments that have perceived its progressive social agenda (modern education, the advancement of the social role of women, democracy, etc.) and internationalism as a threat to their worldview and political continuity.

The Baha'i Faith originated in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century and since then has spread such that there are now functioning Baha'i communities in almost every country in the world and an estimated global population of 5 million, with about 400,000 in Iran, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in that country.¹ Throughout its history in Iran, the Baha'i community has been subjected to a level of persecution that has amounted at times to genocide at local or national levels. Alongside the attempt to eliminate the Baha'is physically, there has been a cultural genocide. The religious leaders of Iran have usually instigated this persecution, fearing both the religious challenge presented by the new religion and also the social changes it advocates. But the state has often also played a willing and sometimes primary role. Since 1979, however, the state and religious leadership have merged and become effectively a single agent, thus intensifying the persecution of the Baha'i community.

After a brief historical survey of the persecutions of the Baha'i community, this chapter focuses on the manner in which the present regime in Iran has waged a campaign of cultural genocide against the Baha'i community since it came to power in 1979, and the manner in which the Baha'is have met this threat. Finally, the question of what measures are available to counter this persecution is addressed.

Persecutions of the Babi and Baha'i communities, 1844–1979

The Baha'i religion began in 1844 in Iran as the Babi movement, led by a young merchant who took the title the Bab and in 1848 claimed to be the Imam Mahdi, a messianic figure expected by the majority religion of Iran, Twelver Shi'i Islam. From the start, the Shi'i Muslim religious leaders perceived the movement as a threat to the traditional forms of religion over which they presided and, after four years, they dragged the country's government into the conflict, resulting in five major episodes in 1848–1853, in which thousands of Babis were killed.²

After its suppression in 1852–1853, the new religion re-emerged towards the end of the 1850s. Its new leader took the title Baha'u'llah and claimed to be the messianic figure foretold by the Bab, and indeed the messianic figure of all religions. The name of the movement now became the Baha'i religion. Throughout the rest of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the Baha'is represented an indigenous pathway to modernity for Iran for many. However, there continued to be periodic persecutions of the Baha'is, usually instigated by a local religious leader who declared his intention to initiate a genocide of the Baha'is by issuing a *fatwa* decreeing the death of all the town's Baha'is.³ When the Qajar dynasty fell, the clerical persecution continued. However, the new shah, Reza Shah Pahlavi, who came to power in 1921–1925, made the first organized national campaign of cultural suppression of the Baha'is, closing their schools, which were among the most modern and forward-looking in the country, suppressing Baha'i community structures and preventing them from publishing or importing books.

When Mohammad Reza Pahlavi ascended the throne in 1941, he relaxed the iron grip of his father, allowing the creation of fiercely anti-Baha'i organizations by the Islamic clerics. These organizations, apart from disrupting Baha'i meetings, threatening Baha'is and anyone associating with them, and arranging boycotts of Baha'i businesses, began the decades of spreading false accusations and disinformation about the Baha'is that has continued and intensified up to today and laid the groundwork for cultural genocide.⁴ After the 1953 coup, the shah was indebted to the religious leadership, who pressured him into allowing a campaign against the Baha'is in 1955, including anti-Baha'i sermons on national radio, beatings and killings of Baha'is, expulsion from employment, and the destruction of their meeting places and holy sites.⁵

Persecutions since the 1979 Islamic revolution

The most recent phase of persecutions of the Iranian Baha'i community began under the present Islamic government of Iran which came to power in 1979. The clerical hierarchy that had for over 100 years been the relentless enemy of the Baha'is was now the country's government and lost no time in launching its attack on their community. The national Baha'i leadership, many local leaders, intellectuals, and prominent Baha'is were eliminated in the first few years of the revolution through secret trials followed by executions. Extreme pressure was brought to bear on the rest of the Baha'i community through a variety of measures that ranged

from the unjust – such as imprisonment on false charges, confiscations of property and dismissals from employment – to the outright ridiculous – such as the ruling by Khomeini that Baha’is had no right to any payment from the government and so all Baha’i government employees and pensioners must repay everything that they had earned or received from the government throughout their working lives.⁶ The present supreme leader has made the following public pronouncement: “Keep away altogether from this perverse and misguided sect ... they are completely perverted ... they are *najis* [ritually unclean].”⁷

The Islamic government perceives the Baha’i community as an ideological threat to its world-view. Khomeini launched a campaign to reverse all the changes modernity had brought to Iran – women’s rights were rolled back, education was put under the control of Islamic fundamentalist “guides”, democracy was made conditional on conforming to Khomeini’s view of Islam, and, in place of Iran’s former outward-looking modern culture, a paranoid regressive culture was created. Baha’is epitomized everything the regime hated and wanted to destroy, therefore they had to be destroyed. This destruction needed to be both physical and cultural. Physical destruction involved executing leading Baha’is and subjecting the rest of the Baha’i community to intense pressure to either leave the country if they were able or to recant and become Muslims. The cultural destruction described in the rest of this chapter was revealed in a leaked government document to be a systematic strategy the government had devised at the highest level (see below).

With the election of President Ahmadinejad in 2005, the situation worsened considerably. The national media were commandeered by the government to provide a torrent of abusive and scurrilous articles written about the Baha’is, falsifying their history, distorting their motives and vilifying their leadership (see below). Even small Baha’i-owned businesses were refused licenses, boycotted or closed down. Lists of individual Baha’is and their addresses were circulated encouraging people to attack them. Courts refused to punish those who beat and killed Baha’is for no reason on grounds that Baha’is deserved such treatment and were not worthy of the law’s protection.

Although many thought Rouhani’s election as president in 2013 and his re-election in 2017 would signal an improvement in the human rights situation, in fact matters became worse, partly due to the actions of Rouhani’s opponents seeking to embarrass and constrain him.

Although few Baha’is have been killed since about 1987, a number of reports and academic papers have examined the potential for genocide of the Baha’is and concluded that all the markers for genocide are present. The Sentinel Project report in 2009, for example, described how the situation for the Iranian Baha’is has gone through all six stages in the schema developed by Gregory Stanton⁸ of the process leading up to genocide (in Stanton’s classification, stage 7 is the genocide itself and stage 8 is denial) and stated that it considered the threat level of genocide of the Baha’i community of Iran to be “High” and that “Preparation is sufficient for extermination”, and “intent is apparent”.⁹ Their 2010 Supplementary Report stated that the threat of genocide “remains high and may only be awaiting the right trigger event”.¹⁰ This state of traversing all the preparatory stages for genocide

with the final stage of “extermination” being prevented only by international pressure has been called a “suspended genocide”.¹¹

The cultural genocide of the Iranian Baha'is after 1979

When Raphael Lemkin first conceptualized the crime of genocide, he envisaged a systematic and synchronized attack on a people that was multi-faceted, including physical and cultural elements. In marked contrast to the situation with physical genocide, the international community has collectively failed to establish a formal legal instrument to define and act against cultural genocide.¹² Although subsequent developments in international law have tended to emphasize the physical and marginalize the cultural elements in an attack, it is clear that, in Lemkin's original concept, genocide was a synchronized attack on all fronts.¹³ The persecution of the Baha'is of Iran since 1979 can best be framed as exactly the sort of “synchronized attack” that Lemkin envisaged, involving both a physical attack and a cultural genocide.¹⁴

The above historical review of the persecution of the Baha'i community before 1979 acts as background to the cultural genocide that has occurred since 1979. After the first decade of the Iranian Revolution, during which Baha'i leaders were killed and there was imminent danger of a physical genocide, the Iranian government, under intense international pressure, switched to a policy of maintaining a severe economic blockade of the Baha'i community, hoping to pressure individual Baha'is into recanting and becoming Muslims, and a campaign of cultural genocide, aimed at obliterating all traces of Baha'i culture in Iran, destroying the Baha'is' morale and creating enmity towards them in the general population.

That this is an organized and systematic campaign is proved by the text of a document dated 25 February 1991 which came to light in 1993 when it was leaked to Reynaldo Pohl, the United Nations Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Iran. The document had been drawn up at a joint meeting of 'Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, then President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, and was then forwarded to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei, who appended his signed approval at the bottom of the document. The document has thus been endorsed by the highest authorities in Iran. It grew out of the realization by the Iranian government that the execution and arrest of Baha'is solely because of their religion was causing adverse international effects for Iran. Therefore in paragraph (a)(ii) below, they ordered a suspension of this type of persecution, substituting economic and cultural measures against the Baha'is:

- a With regard to the general condition of Baha'is, the following guidelines are hereby adopted:
 - i they shall not be expelled from the country without reason;
 - ii they shall not be detained, imprisoned or punished without reason;
 - iii the Government's treatment of them shall be such that their progress and development shall be blocked;

- b With regard to their educational and cultural situation, the following directions are hereby adopted:
 - i they may be enrolled in schools provided that they do not identify themselves as Baha'is, but they shall if possible be assigned to schools with a strong religious ideology;
 - ii when a student is known to be a Baha'i, he shall be expelled from university, either during the admission process or in the course of the academic year;
 - iii their political activities, "including espionage", shall be countered by means of the relevant official policies and laws, and their religious activities and teaching shall be confronted by means of other religious activities and teaching, cultural responses and propaganda;
 - iv the propaganda institutions, such as the Islamic Propaganda Organization, shall establish special sections to counter the religious activities and teachings of the Baha'is;
 - v a plan shall be formulated to combat and destroy the cultural roots which this group has outside the country;
- c As regards their legal and social position, the following guidelines are hereby adopted:
 - i they shall be permitted to lead a modest life similar to that of the population in general;
 - ii to the extent that this does not constitute encouragement for them to persist in their status as Baha'is, they shall be allowed the normal means to live like all other Iranian citizens, such as ration books, passports, death certificates and work permits;
 - iii employment shall be refused to persons identifying themselves as Baha'is;
 - iv they shall also be denied positions of influence, for example in the education sector.¹⁵

But the Iranian government did not keep even to those few areas in this document which allowed the Baha'is some relief. Very soon, arrests and imprisonments "without reason" restarted and Baha'is were not allowed "to lead a modest life similar to that of the population in general". Baha'is were dismissed from employment and even small single-person Baha'i businesses were targeted for forced closure and withdrawal of licenses.

The attempt by the Iranian government to bring about a cultural genocide of the Baha'i community can be detailed under a number of headings.

Black propaganda and disinformation

Fundamental to both the physical and cultural genocide of Baha'is in Iran has been the black propaganda and disinformation campaign against the community, calculated to turn the mind of the population against the Baha'is and to justify their obliteration from Iran both physically and culturally. As noted, this campaign

began in the 1940s when Islamic organizations, such as the Hujjatiyyih (called the Anti-Baha'i Society when first formed) and Tablighat-i Islami, directed a major part of their activities against the Baha'i Faith. Although these efforts were instigated by Muslim clerics, the surprising aspect is the extent to which Iranians who are considered to have been scholars, liberals and intellectuals either failed to counteract the campaign or in many cases actively supported it.¹⁶

This campaign sought to present Baha'i culture as anti-Iranian, anti-Islamic and evil: the "enemy within". The anti-Iranian element was fed by such strategies as publishing a fake autobiography of the Russian ambassador in Iran in the 1840s–1850s, in which he is said to have created the Babi and Baha'i movements.¹⁷ Alternatively, the respected Iranian academic historian Fereyduun Adam-iyyat presented false evidence of the British being founders of the Babi movement.¹⁸ The message to ordinary Iranians was clear – the Baha'i Faith is a foreign creation, designed to weaken Iran. Attacks were also launched showing the Baha'i Faith promoting such concepts as an increased social role for women in order to weaken Islam. Perhaps the most damaging of all were the attacks designed to present the Baha'is as inherently evil. For example, a woman and her five children were murdered in Abarqu in January 1950 by the agents of Isfandiyar Salari, one of the notables of the area, because the woman was standing in the way of his marriage to a wealthy heiress. Salari managed to get an innocent neighbour and 15 Baha'is arrested, accused and, as a result of the severe pressure brought to bear on the prosecutors and the government by the Tablighat-i Islami and leading clerics, convicted of the crime despite the lack of evidence and amidst a blaze of publicity.¹⁹

After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, however, the volume and intensity of the black propaganda increased. The accusations of Baha'is being linked to foreign powers and plotting to destroy Islam continued. A recent pronouncement by Khamenei continues this pattern by accusing the Baha'is of being an artificial religion created by the British to destroy Islam.²⁰ To this has been added intense efforts to depict the Baha'is as inherently evil, paralleling, for example, the same "blood libel" that Jews in the Middle Ages had been accused of – that they kidnap Muslim children and kill them in their meetings;²¹ or the Iranian equivalent of "flirty fishing" (the practice of women attracting men to a religion by sexual means).²²

As with all propaganda campaigns based on disinformation, the emerging claims are often contradictory. For example, the welter of claims that the Baha'i Faith was started by the Russians and the British is apparently oblivious to the fact that the British and Russians were keen and deadly rivals in the area at this time and to suggest they acted in concert in such a venture demonstrates historical ignorance. Some government statements claim that the Baha'i Faith is not a religion at all but a political movement.²³ More recent statements seem to allow that the Baha'i Faith is a religion but try to depict it in the manner in which "cults" were depicted at the height of the cult hysteria in the West in the 1990s.²⁴ This is in effect an admission by the government that its former stance that the Baha'i Faith is not a religion is no longer credible, especially with Iran's young population.

With government funding of several so-called “research institutes” dedicated to producing anti-Baha’i material, the number of articles and books published against the Baha’i Faith has increased greatly. In the Iranian media between April 2014 and August 2015, for example, there were an average of 376 anti-Baha’i articles per month with a peak of 1046 in August 2014.²⁵

A major problem faced by the Baha’i community is that it has never, since its origins in the mid-nineteenth century, been able to publish any refutation of the black propaganda directed against it. Successive governments have consistently refused to allow the Baha’is to publish any sort of publication (books, pamphlets, magazines, etc.), while newspapers and other media have never accepted anything written by Baha’is defending their faith. As a consequence, the population of Iran has never heard a Baha’i rebuttal of the black propaganda. With the media promoting the attacks on the Baha’i community and no counter-narrative being put forward, it is little wonder that generations of Iranians have grown up with negative impressions of the Baha’is. It can be said this has been an attempt to drive the Baha’is into a cultural ghetto.

Erasure from history

Alongside distorting and falsifying history with respect to the Baha’i community, there has also been an effort to erase all positive achievements of individual Baha’is and the Baha’i community from the history of Iran. Scholars and intellectuals have been prejudiced against the religion to the extent that they do not even mention the name of the religion in their discourses. If one were to read the literature published inside Iran during both the Pahlavi and Islamic Revolution period, one would find the Baha’is almost completely erased from Iran’s history except for some negative mentions. The epitome of this was the statement by Mrs Teimurtash, on behalf of Iran’s delegation, to the United Nations, that there were no Baha’is in Iran,²⁶ a position that was backed up by census statistics showing no Baha’is.²⁷ There is no attempt in the literature published in Iran to describe the Baha’i teachings or the Baha’i community except in polemical tones. One might think they were a small group of recidivists lurking on the margins of society. Yet, the Baha’is are a highly educated segment of the population and contributed greatly in all areas of Iranian culture: art, architecture, literature, education, as well as commerce, medicine and the social and physical sciences.²⁸ Many Muslims and Baha’is who rose to eminent positions were educated at the Baha’i schools in Iran. And yet the Baha’i Faith is never mentioned in any positive way in material published inside Iran and if the names of the Baha’i schools are mentioned it is never stated that they were Baha’i schools.²⁹

Destruction of Baha’i holy places

The Baha’i Faith began in Iran and thus many of the holy places associated with the early history of the religion are in Iran. Many of these are significant to all Baha’is around the world; others are of national and local significance. An

important way in which the Islamic Republic is seeking to eradicate Baha'i culture in Iran is through destroying Baha'i holy places. The most important Baha'i holy place destroyed was the House of the Bab in Shiraz, which was pulled down in 1979.³⁰ Its significance lay in that Baha'is regard it as the place where their religion began in 1844 and also in that it is one of only two places of pilgrimage ordained by Baha'u'llah (the other being outside Iran). This was just one of several important holy sites that were first confiscated and most then destroyed.

Although the destruction of holy places has saddened Baha'is in Iran and throughout the world, the danger to them had been anticipated and detailed architectural plans and photographs of these buildings had already been taken with a view to rebuilding them when conditions improve.

Elimination of community institutions

Part of cultural genocide involves the destruction of the social structure of a community that makes it distinctive from other communities. The Baha'i community is distinctive in that it has no clerics or other paid religious professionals. It is administered by elected councils. Very early in the Islamic Revolution, the government struck at this elected leadership thinking they could gain a quick and easy victory by decapitating the community. Members of the national council and several local councils were arrested and executed in August 1980. However, elected councils have an inbuilt resilience in that they can be replaced. A new national leadership council came into being and when that was also arrested and executed in December 1981, a third one appeared. Next the government decided to issue instructions to the national council to disband all Baha'i institutions in the country. Since the Baha'i community has a policy of obedience to the government (which has been in force since the time of its founder Baha'u'llah in the nineteenth century), it complied. However, this had the unintended consequence of releasing individual Baha'is from any institutional oversight. Thus the action not only failed to suppress the activities of Baha'is, these actually increased in general and the government no longer had any instrument for sending instructions to individual Baha'is. Therefore after a time, the government decided to give tacit recognition to a group of five, later seven, Baha'is, called the Yaran, as an informal leadership cadre of the national Baha'i community. Despite the fact that the Yaran were actively cooperating with the government, they were all arrested during 2008 and eventually sentenced to ten years imprisonment, which they completed in full.³¹

Baha'i community life was also disrupted by such measures as the confiscation of local Baha'i community offices and meeting halls. However, meetings continued in the homes of Baha'is. Of great concern was the confiscation of Baha'i cemeteries and the refusal of the authorities to allow burials in them (many were destroyed and built over). This causes particular hardship because almost all cemeteries in Iran belong to specific religious communities and so, when Baha'is die, great problems and anxieties result for their families. Government

forms, such as registration of births and deaths, pose difficulties as officials refuse to accept forms with “Baha’i” or a blank in the “Religion” space and Baha’is refuse to dissimulate by naming one of the accepted religions.

Ethnic cleansing (forcible transfer of population)

The term “ethnic cleansing” was employed to describe a major humanitarian crime committed in the Balkans in the 1990s. The definition of “ethnic cleansing” adopted by the UN Commission of Experts in its final report on violations of international humanitarian law committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia included “religious groups”: “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas”.³²

As in the Balkans where the whole Muslim population of an area was driven out to make the area “ethnically pure”, so too in many tribal and rural areas in Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Baha’is were proclaimed by local religious leaders to be “unclean” and the Muslims in the area were urged to drive the Baha’is out to “purify” the area. Even in villages such as Mahfuruzak, Mazandaran; Saysan, Azarbayjan; and Kata, near Isfahan, where Baha’is had previously been the majority in a village, they were driven out by their Muslim neighbours, urged on by their clerical leaders who now also held political authority. These Baha’is, forced to leave behind all their possessions and completely destitute, would usually take refuge in the nearest city. The authorities refused to take any steps to redress these injustices or to give Baha’is any assistance. Their survival depended on the assistance given them by fellow Baha’is.³³

Educational exclusion

The Baha’i teachings place a high value on education, making it obligatory for all Baha’i parents to educate their children; if they are unable to do this, the obligation falls on the Baha’i community.³⁴ As a result, in towns and villages across Iran, the Baha’i community led the way in setting up modern schools for both boys and girls in the early twentieth century (they were closed by order of Reza Shah in 1934).³⁵ By 1973, the Baha’i community was able to claim 100 per cent literacy among women under 40,³⁶ this at a time when the literacy rate for women under 40 in Iran was 44 per cent.³⁷ Given the high priority education has in Baha’i culture, the Islamic Republic’s consistent refusal to allow Baha’i students access to universities is not just an attack on the economic prospects of individual young Baha’is but also a blow against Baha’i culture calculated to depress the community’s morale.

After years of failed attempts to enroll their youth into Iran’s universities, the Baha’i community established an underground university, the Baha’i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE),³⁸ using Baha’i university teachers who had been expelled from their jobs to teach young Baha’is university-level courses in a formal and structured programme. The BIHE has been successful, even

managing to get its degrees accepted by many Western universities as formal qualifications for entry to higher degree courses. However, the Islamic government was so determined to strike at all Baha'i culture that it pursued even this manifestation of it, raiding the premises (often private homes) used for teaching courses and arresting the teachers on several occasions in the last 2 decades; 17 educators and administrators of the BIHE were sentenced to terms of imprisonment up to 5 years.³⁹ The Baha'is responded by shifting most of the teaching to online courses offered by professors outside Iran.

Apartheid

"Apartheid", as defined in the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (ICSPCA), is restricted to racial groups: "inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them".⁴⁰ However, its definition has now been extended to include "segregation on grounds other than race".⁴¹

Many features of the situation of the Baha'is in Iran parallel that of black and other people of colour in apartheid South Africa described in the ICSPCA:⁴² the forced removal of Baha'i communities from certain areas; the planned and systematically implemented campaign of the Iranian government to curtail the rights of Baha'is; their exclusion from government employment; the refusal to grant business licenses to Baha'is and their exclusion from many areas of trade; the refusal of the police to act in cases where Muslims have committed crimes against Baha'is; the refusal of the courts to convict or give legal redress in cases where Muslims have committed crimes against Baha'is; the random and disruptive nature of the arrests of Baha'is; the torture of Baha'is; the exclusion of Baha'is from higher education; and the persecution of individuals such as lawyers who seek to assist Baha'is or point out the injustices being committed.⁴³

Disruption of community life

One way of striking at the culture of a community is to disrupt community life. Since the 1979 Revolution, Baha'i community life has been constantly disrupted. Religious meetings have been raided and dispersed; children's class teachers have been arrested and some executed; and study groups and other activities have been banned or disrupted. Each individual Baha'i faces what has been called "revolving door arrests",⁴⁴ repeated cycles of arrest, interrogation, detention for periods of time and then release, making it impossible for them to earn a livelihood through employment or to run a small business, and instigating fear and uncertainty in the community at large. Some are put on trial, with inadequate opportunity to consult lawyers, vague non-specific charges such as "causing corruption upon the earth" and scanty knowledge of the evidence against them. They are then sentenced to imprisonment, not uncommonly for seven to ten years.

These repeated arrests and imprisonment of Baha'is has had unintended consequences. Imprisoned Baha'is meet other prisoners of conscience such as political activists, intellectuals and journalists and have ample opportunity to explain the Baha'i Faith to them and to dispel the suspicions that were in their minds due to black propaganda. As a consequence, the negative attitude of these secular individuals has to some extent been reversed. Many political reformers and journalists now know and appreciate the Baha'i Faith.⁴⁵ Barriers erected by clerical leaders and intellectuals over the last century and a half, isolating the Baha'i community in a cultural ghetto, have diminished.

Forced change of community mores

In common with other religious minorities in Iran, Baha'is have been forced to give up the public expression of some of their communal ethos and mores and adopt those of the Muslim majority. For example, before the Revolution, men and women mixed and conversed freely at Baha'i meetings. Such social freedom for women is strictly forbidden by the Islamic republican government and considered equivalent to sexual immorality, deserving of arrest and imprisonment, even if the individuals are not Muslims. Therefore the Baha'is have been forced publically to adopt the mores and ethos of the government's religious ideology. Although some degree of freedom exists in the privacy of Baha'i homes, this must necessarily be with small groups only and is a danger to all participants.

The reaction of the Baha'i community

Based on principles established by Baha'u'llah and his successors, the Universal House of Justice, the present head of the worldwide Baha'i community, has called for a non-violent, non-contentious response to the persecutions, seeking ways of collaborating with other social actors to form alliances for alternative constructive social action. This approach has been termed "constructive resilience".⁴⁶ Their consistent and firm insistence on their human rights and their refusal to submerge their identity in the way the government wishes has gained the Baha'is many admirers in Iran,⁴⁷ beginning to roll back some of the effects of the black propaganda directed against the Baha'is. Even voices from inside Iran are daring to call for the end of the cultural genocide of the Baha'is.⁴⁸

The above description of the persecutions demonstrates that the Baha'i community of Iran has been remarkably resilient to the unrelenting campaign waged against it by the Iranian government. Very few have acquiesced to the government's aim of forcing them to recant their faith and become Muslims. Nor has the community in general allowed itself to be ground down into a state of passive victimhood. Some have been demoralized and have distanced themselves from community activities, knowing that they could be subject to arbitrary arrest and detention just for attending. Most, however, have participated in a global change of direction in community affairs initiated by the Universal House of Justice in 1996. Briefly, the change can be described as a movement away from a hierarchical,

inward-looking administration of community affairs and towards a more participatory, consultative, collaborative, outward-looking style of community life. A programme to train people for this more participatory community life was rolled out to the Iranian Baha'i community beginning in the early 2000s.⁴⁹

This new pattern of Baha'i community life has helped Baha'is to be resilient to the campaign of cultural genocide waged against them. First, the move from a hierarchical structure to a more decentralized community life has rendered less effective the government's attempts to "decapitate" the movement by executing national and local leaders. Second, an important component of the training programme accompanying this change has been to encourage every individual Baha'i to take responsibility for the educational and pastoral needs of the community (children's classes, junior youth empowerment programmes, holding devotional meetings, etc.), rather than leaving this to local leaders and administrators. This allows the community to function at the micro level even in the face of persecution at the macro. The third important factor is that the programme has been designed to be open to all. It can be undertaken in small groups to which friends who are not Baha'is can be invited. Utilizing networks of friends, Baha'is, especially young Baha'is, have been able to gather in groups, including their friends who are not Baha'is, to study the training programme together and to carry out social action programmes such as literacy classes for the poor and disaster relief after earthquakes.⁵⁰ Whereas, throughout the twentieth century, the Baha'i community tended to be somewhat inward-looking with Muslim Iranians often complaining of its secretive nature, now the emphasis is on individual Baha'is welcoming neighbours to participate in social action and community activities. This has helped the Baha'is to forge links with others in their community and thus break out of the cultural ghetto that the government has tried to force them into.

Cultural genocide: discussion

The progress towards a genocide of the Baha'i community in the early years after the 1979 Islamic revolution was halted mainly as a result of international pressure and this remains the most effective means of countering the cultural genocide that the Baha'i community is now experiencing.

But can any measures be taken in international law against these actions of the Iranian government? Unfortunately, in marked contrast to the situation with physical genocide and Raphael Lemkin's original holistic description of genocide, the international community has collectively failed to establish a formal legal instrument to define and act against cultural genocide.⁵¹ The first draft of the Genocide Convention in 1947 included:

Article I.3: Destroying the specific characteristics of the group by:

- a forcible transfer of children to another human group; or
- b forced and systematic exile of individuals representing the culture of a group; or

- c prohibition of the use of the national language even in private intercourse; or
- d systematic destruction of books printed in the national language or of religious works or prohibition of new publications; or
- e systematic destruction of historical or religious monuments or their diversion to alien uses, destruction or dispersion of documents and objects of historical, artistic, or religious value and of objects used in religious worship.

Article III: All forms of public propaganda tending by their systematic and hateful character to promote genocide, or tending to make it appear as a necessary, legitimate or excusable act shall be punished.⁵²

Baha'is have suffered from all the acts listed in Articles I.3 and III above except I.3.c. There is anecdotal evidence that I.3.a has occurred but to a limited extent. However, Article I.3 did not become part of the agreed Convention and Article III is a much weaker text.

In practice, therefore, crimes of cultural genocide have been prosecuted under other labels, some as "crimes against humanity", the prohibition of which "has been considered a peremptory norm of international law, from which no derogation is permitted and which is applicable to all States".⁵³ Thus, the 1998 Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court states: "For the purpose of this Statute, 'crime against humanity' means any of the following acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack." Of the list that is then given, the following "crimes against humanity" may also be regarded as acts of cultural genocide that have been committed against the Baha'i community of Iran:

- Deportation or forcible transfer of population;
- Persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender ... or other grounds that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law, in connection with any act referred to in this paragraph or any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court;
- The crime of apartheid.⁵⁴

It can be seen from the above description of what has happened to the Baha'i community that every one of these facets of cultural genocide has been experienced by them repeatedly and over an extended period, especially since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. There are also UN declarations that set out situations of cultural genocide analogous to that which the Baha'is of Iran are experiencing.⁵⁵

The Iran Tribunal is an international people's court and a non-binding legal tribunal that was set up in The Hague, the Netherlands, to investigate, document and hand down judgements on human rights abuses in Iran. In its judgement of

5 February 2013, it cited the treatment of Baha'is as examples of "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment" and "persecution".⁵⁶

Conclusion

A campaign against the Baha'i community has been deliberately and systematically carried out by the Iranian government since 1979. This campaign began with a steady progression towards a physical genocide. When this was halted through international pressure, the government devised a programme attacking the Baha'is psychologically (through black propaganda and undermining morale), economically (through removing all means of earning a livelihood and excluding them from higher education) and culturally (by destroying Baha'i holy places and eliminating Baha'is from Iranian history and culture). Many elements of the campaign are clearly instances of cultural genocide. Although cultural genocide itself is not regarded as a crime in international law, there are many grounds on which the government of Iran could be indicted for its cultural genocide of the Baha'i community. These include contraventions of the international legal statutes and treaties on crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and possibly apartheid.

Despite the attempt by the Iranian government to force the Baha'i community into a cultural ghetto and create a state of cultural apartheid, the Baha'is in general have resisted the pressure upon them and have responded with resilience and a constructive outlook, attempting to bring together all progressive, non-political elements in their society to work for the betterment of all.

Notes

- 1 Association of Religion Data Archives, World Religion Project: Global Religion Dataset, data for 2010, www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Downloads/WRPGLOBAL_DL2.asp and National Profiles, 2005 Update: Religion Indexes, Adherents and Other Data, www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Downloads/INTL2003_DL2.asp (accessed 21 September 2018).
- 2 Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge: University Press Cambridge, 1987), 5–56. Specifically about the violence in these Babi upheavals, see Moojan Momen, "Millennialism and Violence: The Attempted Assassination of Nasir al-Din Shah of Iran by the Babis in 1852", *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 12, Issue 1 (August 2008), 57–82; Moojan Momen, "Millennialist Narrative and Apocalyptic Violence: The Case of the Babis of Iran", *Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions*, 20 (2018), 1–18.
- 3 For example, the persecution in Yazd in 1903; see Moojan Momen, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions, 1844–1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), 373–404. The exact number of Baha'is killed in the Yazd pogrom of 1903 is uncertain. Baha'i histories record the killing of 81 adults, but this does not take into account the many deaths among the men, women and children who died as a result of being driven out into the desert in mid-summer with no provisions.
- 4 Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 48–54.

- 5 Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1980), 76–83.
- 6 Nazila Ghanea, *Human Rights, the UN and the Baha'is of Iran* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2002); Margit Warburg, *Iranske Documenter: Forfølgelsen af baha'ierne i Iran* (Copenhagen: Rhodos, 1985).
- 7 Photograph of original document and translation in Baha'i International Community, *"Their Progress and Development are Blocked": The Economic Oppression of Iran's Baha'is* (New York: Baha'i International Community, 2015), 56–57. <https://iran.bahaipersecution.bic.org/archive/economic-oppression-irans-bahais> (accessed 11 June 2018).
- 8 Gregory H. Stanton, "The Eight Stages of Genocide", *Genocide Watch*. <http://genocidewatch.net/2013/03/14/the-8-stages-of-genocide> (accessed 10 April 2018). Stanton's stages have now been revised to ten: Gregory H. Stanton, "The Ten Stages of Genocide", *Genocide Watch*. <http://genocidewatch.org/genocide/tenstagesofgenocide.html> (accessed 10 April 2018). The extra two stages are "Discrimination" and "Persecution". In the rest of this chapter, it can be seen that the Baha'i community has gone through these two stages as well.
- 9 Sentinel Project, *Preliminary Assessment: The Threat of Genocide to the Baha'is of Iran*, (n.p., 15 May 2009), 1. <https://thesentinelproject.org/iran/> (accessed 10 October 2018).
- 10 Sentinel Project, *Preliminary Assessment*, 1; *Supplementary Report* (20 September 2010), 7.
- 11 Moojan Momen, "The Baha'i Community of Iran: A Case of 'Suspended Genocide'?" *Journal of Genocide Research*, 7 (2005), 221–241.
- 12 See Chapter 2 of this book and, for example, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Prosecutor v. Krstić, Case No. IT-98–33-T (Yugoslavia Trial Chamber 2001), Judgment, paras. 574–580, esp. para. 580. www.icty.org/x/cases/krstic/tjug/en/krs-tj010802e.pdf (accessed 16 April 2018).
- 13 Thomas Butcher, "A 'Synchronized Attack': On Raphael Lemkin's Holistic Conception of Genocide", *Journal of Genocide Studies*, 15, no. 3 (2013), 253–271.
- 14 See Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944).
- 15 Commission on Human Rights (United Nations), forty-ninth session. *Final Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran by the Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights, Mr. Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, Pursuant to Commission Resolution 1992/67 of 4 March 1992* (Document E/CN.4/1993/41, 28 January 1993), 55, paras. 310–311. www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E%2FCN.4%2F1993%2F41 (accessed 8 October 2018).
- 16 Houchang E. Chehabi, "Anatomy of Prejudice: Reflections on Secular Anti-Baha'ism", in Dominic Brookshaw and Seena Fazel, eds., *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2008), 184–199.
- 17 Moojan Momen, "Dolgorukov Memoirs", *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 7 (London, 1996), 477–478. www.iranicaonline.org/articles/dolgorukov-memoirs (accessed 15 April 2018).
- 18 Fereyduun Vahman, *Yik Sad va Shast Sal Mubarizih ba A'in-i Baha'i* (3rd printing, Spanga, Sweden: Baran, 2010), 267–268. See also Amanat, *Resurrection*, 439.
- 19 Muhammad Taqi Afnan, *Bigunahan* (London: privately published, 1378/1999), 51–240; Vahman, *Yik Sad va Shast Sal Mubarizih*, 203–218.
- 20 Ayatollah Sayyid 'Ali Khamene'i, "Faqihan dar barabar-i sakhtarshikanan". <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-dialog?id=17472> (accessed 8 April 2018).
- 21 'Ali Akbar Mas'udi Khumayni, *Khatirat-i Ayatullah Mas'udi Khumayni* (ed. Javad Imami, Tehran: Markaz-i Asnad-i Inqilab-i Islami, 1381/2002), 229–230; see also "Gushih-iy az khuy-i hayvani-yi Baha'iiyat", *Raja News*. <http://rajanews.com/Detail.asp?id=50762>; "Jalasih-yi shabanih-yi Baha'iiyan dar Bagh-i Uvaysi-yi

- Qum". www.broujerdi.ir/index.php/260-2016-03-26-04-19-40 and over 20 blogs (all accessed 8 April 2018).
- 22 "Maḥal Rabitih-yi Jinsi ba Dukhtaran bih Shart-i Baha'i Shudan", *Serat News*, www.seratnews.com/fa/news/196541 (accessed 9 April 2018); "Su Istifadih-yi Firqih-yi Baha'iyyat az Jadhhabiyat-i Jinsi", *Irannaz*, www.irannaz.com/news_detail_11140.html (accessed 9 April 2018).
- 23 Position stated by Khomeini both before he became Iran's leader: James Cockcroft, "Iran's Khomeini", *Seven Days*, 3, no. 1 (23 February 1979), 20; and after: Ruḥullah Khomeini, *Sahifih-yi Nur*, Vol. 17 (Tehran: Vizarat-i Irshad-i Islami, 1985), 267; see also Eliz Sansarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 116; statement of Ayatullah Āmulī Lārījānī, head of Iran's judiciary, see "Āmulī Lārījānī: Bahā'iyyat dīn nīst", *Entekhab*, www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/269230 (accessed 10 April 2018); statement of Mansur Haqiqatpur, Deputy Head of the Iranian Parliamentary Commission on National Security, "Bahā'iyyat aqaliyyat-i dīnī nīst", *ICANA (Islamic Consultative Assembly News Agency)*, www.icana.ir/Fa/News/286516 (accessed 10 April 2018).
- 24 This accusation became prevalent in 2010, after Muhammad Javad Larijani, Secretary-General of the High Council for Human Rights in Iran, said this at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. See Ḥamid Ṣaburi, "Azar-i Baha'īyan bar mabna-yi 'sanariyaw-yi kalt'", *Gooya*, <http://news.gooya.com/politics/archives/2010/09/110319.php> (accessed 10 April 2018).
- 25 Baha'i International Community, "Their Progress", 13.
- 26 Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 187.
- 27 See for example *National and Provincial Statistics of the First National Census of Iran (November 1956. Vol. 2: Social and Economic Characteristics of the Inhabitants for Iran and the Census Provinces)* (Tehran: Ministry of Interior, June 1962), 146–161.
- 28 See, for example, the Baha'is listed in Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians: Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941–1979* (2 vols., Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008).
- 29 The partial list of eminent Iranians educated at the Baha'i Tarbiyat school in Tehran in Soli Shahvar, *The Forgotten Schools: The Baha'is and Modern Education in Iran, 1899–1934* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 179–182, must be regarded as a just a preliminary assessment. There are several others who should be added, such as Gholam Hussein Ebtehaj, Abolhassan Ebtehaj, and Dr Ghassem Ghani. That these individuals attended a Baha'i school is usually concealed in their biographies published in Iran.
- 30 Vahman, *Yik Sad*, 481–487.
- 31 Summarized in Baha'i International Community, *The Baha'i Question: Cultural Cleansing in Iran* (New York: Baha'i International Community, 2008), 13–14. <https://iranbahaipersecution.bic.org/archive/bahai-question-cultural-cleansing-iran> (accessed 11 June 2018).
- 32 United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, "Ethnic Cleansing". www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/ethnic-cleansing.html (accessed 16 April 2018).
- 33 "Baha'is of Kata Threatened with Looting Unless They Convert to Islam", *Ayandagan* newspaper, 8 May 1979 (translated at <https://iranbahaipersecution.bic.org/archive/bahais-kata-threatened-looting-unless-they-convert-islam>, accessed 16 June 2018); Moojan Momen, "Social and Economic Development in an Iranian Village: The Baha'i Community of Saysan", *Baha'i Studies Review* 15, no. 1 (2009), 67–81; Moojan Momen, "Tārīkhchih-yi Jāmi'ih-yi Bahā'ī dar Rustā-yi Māhfurūzak, Māzandarān", *Payām-i Bahā'ī* 352 (March 2009), 33–37, 59; 353 (April 2009), 33–36, 43.
- 34 Shahvar, *Forgotten Schools*, 15–20.

- 35 Shahvar, *Forgotten Schools*, 60–130, 147–178; Momen, Moojan. “Baha’i Schools in Iran”, in Dominic P. Brookshaw and Seena B. Fazel, eds., *The Baha’is of Iran: Socio-cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2008), 94–122.
- 36 *The Baha’i World, Vol. 15: 1968–1973* (Haifa: Universal House of Justice, 1976), 248.
- 37 Calculated from figures given for 7–39-year-old females in the 1355 (1976) census in *Sālnāmih Āmārī: Sāl-i 1364* (Tehran: Markaz-i Āmār-i Īran, 1364 AHS/1985), 108. The same figures can be found in *Iran Statistical Year-Book 1377, March 1998–March 1999* (Tehran: Statistical Centre of Iran, 2000), 601.
- 38 The Baha’i Institute for Higher Education, see <http://bihe.org> (accessed 11 June 2018).
- 39 Baha’i International Community, *The Baha’i Question Revisited: Persecution and Resilience in Iran* (New York: Baha’i International Community, 2016). <https://iran.bahai-persecution.bic.org/archive/bahai-question-revisited-persecution-and-resilience-iran> (accessed 11 June 2018), 34.
- 40 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, 1976, p. 245, Article 2. <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201015/volume-1015-I-14861-English.pdf> (accessed 28 June 2018).
- 41 See for example definitions at *Oxford Living Dictionary* (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/apartheid>, accessed 11 June 2018); *Merriam Webster Dictionary* (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apartheid, accessed 11 June 2018).
- 42 See International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid.
- 43 Natasha Schmidt “The Cost of Discrimination”, *Iranwire*, 27 May 2016. <https://iranwire.com/en/features/5334>; and the film “The Cost of Discrimination”. <https://vimeo.com/229149319> (accessed 19 April 2018).
- 44 Baha’i International Community, *The Baha’i Question*, 29.
- 45 For example, see the widely reported meeting between Fa’izih Rafsanjani (daughter of former president Hashemi-Rafsanjani and herself a political activist) and her Baha’i former fellow-prisoner Fariba Kamalabadi; Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Rafsanjani Daughter Criticised for Meeting Leader of Banned Minority”. www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/17/rafsanjani-daughter-criticised-meeting-leader-banned-sect-iran (accessed 28 June 2018); also a letter of support by a political prisoner, Khalid Khardani, “Namih-yi Khalid Khardani bih bahanih-yi hashtumin salgard-i rahbaran-i Baha’i”. www.bazdasht.com/index3.php?code=3307 (accessed 28 June 2016).
- 46 Michael Karlberg, “Constructive Resilience: The Baha’i Response to Oppression”, *Peace and Change* 35, no. 2 (April 2010), 222–257.
- 47 Sentiments publically expressed at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, New York, March 2018, by a prominent Iranian social activist, whose identity is concealed to protect him/her.
- 48 Some examples from among a growing number of such messages include: “Belief Cannot Be a Basis for Legal Offence or Religious Sin”, five Iranian religious scholars have called for tolerance and freedom for the Baha’is (<http://zeitoons.com/9157>, accessed 27 June 2018; translation: <http://iranpresswatch.org/post/14709>, accessed 27 June 2018); Sadeh Zibakalam (professor of political science at the University of Tehran), “What Ms. Faezeh Hashemi Did Was the Right Thing to Do from Every Perspective”. www.facebook.com/SadehZibakalam/photos/a.10150270890319767.350779.810044004766/10154368519129767/?type=3&theatre (accessed 28 June 2018), partial translation at <http://iranpresswatch.org/post/14685> (accessed 28 June 2018); Khardani, “Namih-yi Khalid Khardani”.
- 49 Little has been written in academic literature about this change in the Baha’i community. Among the few papers on this is the following about the impact of this change on the Baha’i community in China: David Palmer, “From ‘Congregations’ to ‘Small Group Community Building’: Localizing the Bahá’i Faith in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China”, *Chinese Sociological Review* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2012–2013), 78–98.

- 50 Amnesty International, "Iran UA 25/08 – Possible Prisoners of Conscience/Fear of Torture or Ill-Treatment", Index number: MDE 13/017/2008. www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/56000/mde130172008eng.pdf (accessed 16 April 2018).
- 51 See Chapter 2 of this book and, for example, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Prosecutor v. Krstic, Case No. IT-98–33-T (Yugoslavia Trial Chamber 2001), Judgment, paras. 574–580, esp. para. 580. www.icty.org/x/cases/krstic/tjug/en/krs-tj010802e.pdf (accessed 16 April 2018). See also Thomas Butcher, "A 'Synchronized Attack': On Raphael Lemkin's Holistic Conception of Genocide", *Journal of Genocide Studies* 15, no. 3 (2013), 253–271.
- 52 Draft Convention on the Crime of Genocide, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/611058/files/E_447-EN.pdf, 6–7 (accessed 27 September 2018).
- 53 United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, "Crimes against Humanity". www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/crimes-against-humanity.html (accessed 16 April 2018). See also the general discussion of this point in Chapter 3 of this book.
- 54 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, article 7, p. 3. www.icc-cpi.int/resource-library/Documents/RS-Eng.pdf (accessed 19 November 2018).
- 55 For example the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples condemns many actions that are analogous to those taken against the Baha'is in Iran; www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf (accessed 27 September 2018).
- 56 Iran Tribunal, "Prosecutor v. Islamic Republic of Iran". Judgment, 5 February 2013. www.irantribunal.com/images/PDF/Iran%20Tribunal%20Judgment.pdf (accessed 17 April 2018).

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