

Report

**Iran: The situation of the Bahá'í  
community**



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**Translation provided by Cellule Relations internationales et européennes, Direction de l'immigration, Service Réfugiés, Luxembourg.**

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**Report Iran: The situation of the Bahá'í community**

## **SUMMARY**

This report deals with the status of the Bahá'í in Iran. It includes a brief account of the emergence of the Bahá'í religion in the Shia Iran in the mid-19th century; the main content of the faith; and the conditions for the Bahá'í community members until the Shah's regime was overthrown in the Islamic revolution in 1979. The main focus of the report is the situation for the Bahá'ís after the revolution. Their status has been seriously affected by the fact that they are not recognised as a religious minority, but rather treated as a political opposition group. Members have been subjected to extensive abuses, including killings, executions, arrests and violent attacks. The government has also established guidelines for systematic discrimination against Bahá'ís when it comes to employment, education, as well as legal and social rights.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Bahá'í community in Iran is estimated to comprise between 150,000 and 300,000 people and is thus one of the largest non-Muslim religious minorities in the country. Their status is unique in the sense that the authorities do not recognise the Bahá'ís as a religious minority, but treat them as a political opposition group (Cole 2005, p. 128). This means that the Bahá'ís are deprived of a number of legal, economic and social rights enjoyed by other Iranian citizens – including members of other religious minorities – in the Islamic Republic. Human rights organisations report that the Bahá'ís are subjected to systematic discrimination by the authorities in their working life and education. In recent years, there has also been an increase in the number of arrests and imprisonments of Bahá'ís, as well as violent attacks on Bahá'ís' property, including arson, vandalism and destruction of Bahá'í burial sites.

This report deals with the situation of members of the Bahá'í community in Iran. It is based on open, written sources, including news articles, human rights reports and academic literature, as well as interviews conducted by Landinfo with representatives and members of the Bahá'í community during a fact-finding mission to Haifa, Israel, in March 2015. Some of the information used in the report comes from Bahá'í sources. Bahá'ís in Iran are in close contact with their co-religionists abroad and disseminate current information about arrests, verdicts and abuse affecting members of the community. Bahá'í sources are generally considered to be trustworthy by UN agencies and other independent observers who reproduce much of the information from Bahá'í sources in their own reports (Afshari 2011, p. 162).

Chapter 2 gives an account of the emergence of the Bahá'í religion in Iran, the central content of the faith and the organisation of the Bahá'í community. Chapter 3 discusses the Bahá'ís' situation in Iran up until the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, while Chapter 4 focuses on the treatment of the Bahá'ís during and immediately after the Islamic Revolution. The conditions in Iran today are described in the subsequent chapters, focusing on various forms of discrimination in different sectors of society (Chapter 5), raids and arrests (Chapter 6), violence and harassment (Chapter 7) and the activities of the Bahá'ís under the prevailing conditions (Chapter 8). Finally, there are some concluding comments about developments after the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 (Chapter 9).

## 2. HISTORY: ORIGINS AND FAITH OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS

The Bahá'í religion originated within a Shiite Muslim environment in Iran in the mid-1800s, and is based on the writings of the prophet Bahá'u'lláh, as well as on the sacred writings of other religions.

## 2.1 ORIGINS

Two persons are central to the genesis of the Bahá'í faith. In 1844, Sayyid Ali Muhammad from Shiraz in southern Persia proclaimed that he was preparing the people for the coming of a new prophet. He claimed that he was the “gate” between the people and the hidden twelfth imam of Shiite teaching, and took the name the Báb, meaning “Gate”. The Báb was viewed as a seditious figure by the government in Persia and was therefore imprisoned and executed in 1850. The Báb's teachings were described as Bábism, which is considered to be a precursor to the Bahá'í faith (SNL, 2009; SNL 2016).

In 1863 Mirza Husayn-Ali Nuri declared that he was the prophet that the Báb had foretold and adopted the religious title of Bahá'u'lláh, which means the Glory of God. Bahá'u'lláh was also imprisoned and tortured before being exiled, first to Baghdad in 1853 and later to Constantinople, Adrianople and finally Acre in Ottoman Palestine, where he died in 1892. This is why the Bahá'í World Centre is located in Haifa in today's Israel.

The prophet Bahá'u'lláh's writings were further developed and systematised by his son Abdul Baha Abbas (originally Abbas Effendi), who took over as head of the Bahá'í faith after Bahá'u'lláh's death. Abdul Baha travelled extensively in Europe and North America and succeeded in making the Bahá'í faith internationally known and widely practised (Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project 2009a). When Abdul Baha died in 1921, the leadership of the Bahá'í community was passed on to his grandson Shoghi Effendi. When Shoghi Effendi died childless in 1957, no new leader was designated. In 1963 the International Bahá'í Council met in London and elected the Universal House of Justice, which since that time has been the supreme body of the Bahá'í community worldwide.

## 2.2 FAITH

The central religious scripture in the Bahá'í faith is the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, meaning the “most holy book”, which was written by Bahá'u'lláh. In addition, there are detailed explanations of various religious, social and legal issues in so-called “Tablets” written by both Bahá'u'lláh and his son and successor, Abdul Baha, and in a letter written by Abdul Baha's grandson Shoghi Effendi (Walbridge 1999). The Bahá'ís also consider a number of sacred writings from other religions to be part of their creed.

The Bahá'ís regard Bahá'u'lláh as the latest in the series of prophets that God has sent to humanity. Bahá'u'lláh acknowledged the prophets of other religions – including Krishna, Buddha, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad – and claimed that they all conveyed the same message, but adapted it to their own era and culture. Bahá'u'lláh rejected many of the injunctions and prohibitions of Islam, and the associated forms of worship, in favour of more general ethical principles for humanity. Central to this are ideas about the common origin of all religions in a common God, the oneness of humanity and the equality of all people – both men and women. All forms of prejudice must be

combated. The individual's own search for truth and God is stressed, and the concept of priesthood is rejected. It is emphasised that religion must be in accordance with science and reason, and the importance of education is highlighted (SNL 2016).

The idea of the oneness and equality of humanity underlies the strong social and political commitment on the part of the Bahá'ís to equal rights, justice, peace and international cooperation. Bahá'u'lláh expressed his scepticism regarding modern European nationalism as follows: "Blessedness does not lie in loving one's own nation, but rather in loving the whole world" (Cole 2005, p. 132). The Bahá'ís' long-term vision is to establish a new, democratic world order ruled by a world parliament and an international court of justice. The Bahá'í community also seeks to introduce a common international economic system and a global language (SNL 2016).

There is relatively little emphasis on rites and forms of worship in the Bahá'í faith. Bahá'ís are, however, required to pray every day and also practice fasting, which is observed from sunrise to sunset between 2nd March and 20th March, which is the last month of the Bahá'í calendar (Walbridge 1996; Smith 2008, p. 188). The year is divided into 19 months, with 19 days in each month. The Nineteen Day Feast is celebrated on the first day of each month. This feast is a major activity within local Bahá'í communities and consists of three elements: the devotional, the administrative, and the social (Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project 2009b). There are a further nine holidays each year, of which the largest is Ridván, which is celebrated in April-May to commemorate Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of himself as a prophet in 1863 (SNL 2016).

Bahá'ís believe that every person has an immortal soul, which is separate from the body. Notions of heaven and hell in other religions are understood by Bahá'ís to be a metaphorical expression of the degree of closeness to or distance from God (Smith 2008, p. 119). In some countries, the Bahá'ís have temples, all of which have nine sides and one dome. The nine sides symbolise humanity's religious diversity, and the dome symbolises the oneness of God. Bahá'ís may, however, also hold services in community halls or private homes.

### **2.3 BAHÁ'Í ADMINISTRATION**

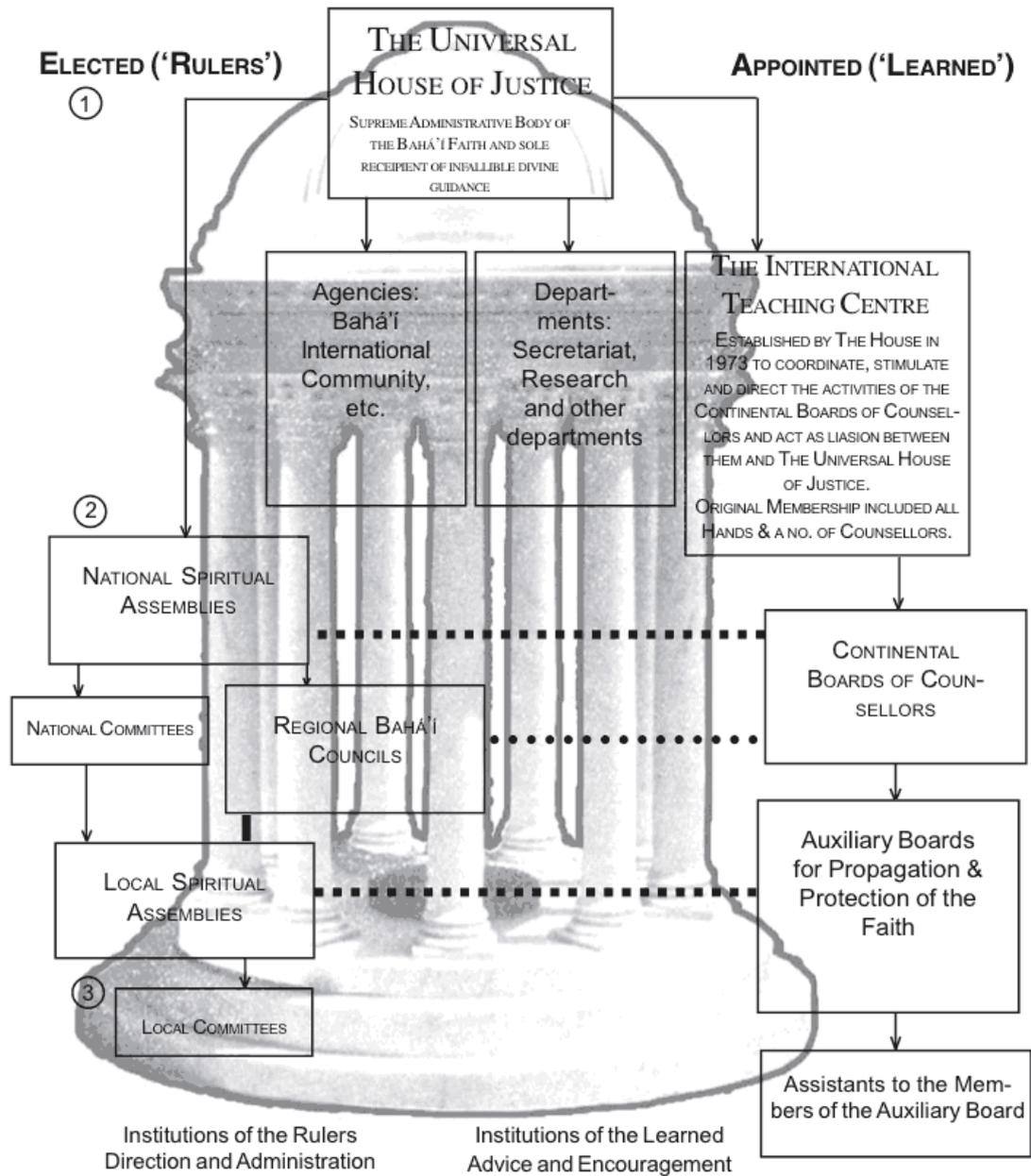
Since 1963, the supreme administrative body of the Bahá'í faith at the international level has been the Universal House of Justice, which has nine male members who are elected every five years by all the National Spiritual Assemblies. The role of the Universal House of Justice, which is considered to have divine authority, is to guide the international Bahá'í community (Bahá'í community in Norway, n.d.).

The Bahá'í community's administrative structures have evolved gradually and reflect the vision of a new, peaceful, social world order. Bahá'u'lláh and Abdul Baha laid down the central core principles of the organisation, which were developed in detail by Shoghi Effendi. The current organisational structure is referred to as the "Administrative Order" and is defined in a "constitution" that was adopted by the Universal House of Justice in 1972. The Administrative Order consists of two parts:

on the one hand, there are democratically elected assemblies in a hierarchical system, from Local Spiritual Assemblies via National Spiritual Assemblies through to the Universal House of Justice, which is the supreme authority. The elected assemblies, which are also called “the Rulers”, have legislative, executive and judicial powers. On the other hand, there is the Institution of the Counsellors, which consists of members who are not elected, but appointed to perform various duties within their geographical area. The task of these counsellors, who are also referred to as “the Learned”, is to assist the elected bodies, as well as to protect and propagate the Bahá’í teachings (Bahá’í Encyclopedia Project 2009b; Smith 2008, p. 175).

The institutions of the Rulers and the Learned should not be understood as a priesthood. The Bahá’ís reject priesthood, based on the idea that the people themselves must read the holy scriptures and arrive at their own understanding of the message (Momen 1997).

In all countries in which there are nine or more Bahá’ís, a national assembly is elected that manages the activities of the religious community. Each year Local Spiritual Assemblies elect representatives to a National Spiritual Assembly – which every five years participates in the election of the Universal House of Justice. In accordance with Bahá’u’lláh’s instructions, all members of the Universal House of Justice must be men (BIC, n.d.).



Organisational chart of Bahá'í administration. Source: D. Troxel (2006).

A key principle of Bahá'í organisation is consultation, both in terms of decision-making processes at all levels and in conflict resolution. Open-minded listening, respect for others' opinions and willingness to change one's mind are important ideals (Momen 1997).

The administrative and spiritual centres of the Bahá'í faith are located in the cities of Haifa and Acre in Israel. The Bahá'í World Centre and Universal House of Justice are located on Mount Carmel in Haifa. This is where Ali Muhammad (the Báb), who announced the coming of a new prophet, is buried. The Bahá'ís' most sacred site is considered to be the tomb of the prophet Bahá'u'lláh, located in Acre, a few kilometers north of Haifa.

### **3. THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY IN IRAN UNDER THE SHAHS**

Since the foundation of the religion, the Bahá'ís have been under considerable pressure from both the political authorities and the Shiite clerical establishment in Iran.

The Bahá'í religion emerged within a Shiite environment in Persia. The first Bahá'ís were therefore seen by the Shia clergy as being apostate Muslims and this view has characterised tensions between the Bahá'ís and the Shia clergy to this day. On the religious level, there were several factors that were perceived as being provocative. The presentation of Bahá'u'lláh as a prophet after Muhammad was itself considered blasphemous, as it violates the Islamic dogma that Muhammad is the "Seal of the Prophets". The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh moreover challenged the Shia clergy by discarding the priesthood as an institution. Furthermore, the new teachings were radical in many areas. Among other things, the Bahá'ís called for equality between women and men and claimed that all religions were expressions of the same god. As a result of extensive proselytising, the early Bahá'ís succeeded in converting Shiites, including prominent figures, and could thus be perceived as a threat. Against this background, the Shia clergy has always been a driving force in pushing successive Iranian regimes to adopt a repressive policy towards the Bahá'í community.

At the political level, the status of the Bahá'ís has varied during different eras. The first Bahá'ís were subjected to severe persecution as a direct result of their predecessors, the Bábís, having carried out a failed assassination attempt against the Shah in 1852. In the wake of the assassination attempt, Bahá'u'lláh was exiled, which weakened his support base in Iran. During the 1890s, however, the first Bahá'í institutions were established in Tehran. The Bahá'ís also established printing houses and schools for both boys and girls, as well as social institutions such as kindergartens and health clinics (Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project 2009c). The early Bahá'ís also included, in addition to Shiite Muslims, a significant number of Jews and Zoroastrians who had converted to the new faith (Amanat 2008; Encyclopædia Iranica 2011a).

The position of religious minorities in Iran was strengthened in a new Iranian constitution in 1906, but the Bahá'ís were not mentioned among the recognised religions. Bahá'í institutions therefore operated without any official status, which laid the foundations for officially sanctioned discrimination against the Bahá'ís throughout the 20th century. At certain times, the Bahá'ís experienced arrests, closures of institutions and violent attacks, but generally they were tolerated under the regimes of the Shahs. During the first part of Reza Pahlavi's rule from 1925 onwards, Bahá'ís were able to expand their activities and hold large public meetings. The first National Spiritual Assembly of Iran was elected in 1934 (Smith 2008, p. 84).

Later in the 1930s, the Shah's regime clamped down on the Bahá'í community by, among other things, prohibiting the distribution of Bahá'í literature, banning Bahá'í marriages and closing all Bahá'í schools in Iran (Encyclopædia Iranica 2011b).

The Bahá'ís were perceived as being supporters of Reza Shah's secular reforms of the 1920s, which were carried out despite strong opposition from the clergy. The Bahá'ís thus became involved in the tug of war between the clergy and the Shah, and in periods when the Shah was weak, the pressure increased on the Bahá'ís, who became scapegoats in Iranian society. Bahá'í support for "Western values" and the alliance with the Shah's regime against the clergy had an adverse effect on public opinion of the Bahá'ís according to MacEoin (Encyclopædia Iranica 2011b).

In 1951 and 1955, the Bahá'ís were subjected to a wave of violence in several cities, inspired by anti-Bahá'í propaganda, culminating in religious leaders using the national radio station to call for holy war against the Bahá'ís. The National Bahá'í Centre in Tehran was occupied by soldiers and partially destroyed (IHRDC 2006, p. 9; Forsythe 2009, p. 135). Both Shiite activists and clerics actively participated in lobbying for increased government pressure on the Bahá'í community. In the 1950s, a messianic, Shia Islamic organisation, the Hojjiyyeh Society, was established, the primary purpose of which was to combat the Bahá'í community (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016, p. 4).

The intensity of the violence against and pressure on the Bahá'ís was to some extent reflected in the number of fatalities in the various phases. A total of 37 Bahá'ís were killed in the period from 1922 to 1955. 15 were killed in the mid-1920s, none in the 1930s, 11 in the 1940s and 11 from 1950 to 1955 (Smith 2008, p. 85).

At the same time, the Bahá'ís received some degree of protection from the Shah, and in the 1960s and 70s many Bahá'ís took the opportunity to forge a career in the Iranian business community (Cole 2005, p. 136-137). On account of their relatively high level of education, they were overrepresented in the public sector, which reinforced the public perception that the Bahá'ís were allies of the Shah's regime (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016, p. 5).

Several of the key figures involved in the clergy's campaign against the Bahá'ís in the 1950s achieved leading positions in the Islamic Republic decades later. Among them was Ayatollah Khomeini, who from the mid-1960s was the leader in exile of the

religious conservatives. When the pressure against the Shah's authoritarian rule increased in the 1970s, Khomeini placed emphasis in his speeches on the Western "poisoning" of Iranian society which the Bahá'ís, among others, stood for. The Bahá'ís were accused of being in league with the Russians, the British and especially the Zionists (Jewish nationalists). In addition, economic success among Bahá'ís led to suspicion, which contributed to resentment and hatred against Bahá'ís among the public and prepared the ground for the reprisals that would affect the Bahá'ís during the Islamic Revolution (IHRDC 2006, p. 12-17).

#### **4. THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY DURING AND AFTER THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION**

During the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1978-79, the Bahá'ís were subjected to extensive acts of violence. The Bahá'í national headquarters in Tehran and their buildings in other provincial capitals were taken over by militiamen loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini. Membership registers and personal information were stolen and later used for the identification and further persecution of Bahá'ís. Bahá'í sources reported on various forms of violence at over 50 places in Iran, including mob attacks, arson and murder. Properties that had belonged to executed or murdered Bahá'ís were not inherited by their bereaved families, but seized by the state (IHRDC 2006, p. 40). 22 Bahá'í centres and cemeteries, hundreds of Bahá'í homes, gardens, businesses and shops were destroyed during the period 1978-1981 (IHRDC 2006, p. 17). Several of the most sacred sites were destroyed, including the home of the Báb in Shiraz and the home of Bahá'u'lláh near Takur (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016, p. 9).

Shortly after the revolution, the new regime implemented measures that obliterated Bahá'ís' economic opportunities. Property and capital were confiscated, and businesses and shops were closed. 10,000 Bahá'ís were dismissed from their posts in the public sector, and some of them were ordered to repay their salaries (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016, p. 8). 15,000 Bahá'ís lost their savings (BIC 2015a, p. 22).

In the aftermath of the revolution, especially the first six years, the treatment of the Bahá'ís took the form of a brutal and chaotic campaign. Imprisonment, torture and murder affected the Bahá'ís collectively and were not necessarily related to the actions of individual victims. The repression was more subdued after Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, when Ali Khamenei was appointed Supreme Leader and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected president. The government exerted control over Islamist activists who had carried out violence and murder against the Bahá'ís. The treatment of the Bahá'ís was thereafter characterised by systematic discrimination and marginalisation rather than by violence and murder (Afshari 2008, p. 261).

This form of persecution has persisted to the present day, but the intensity has varied in different periods. There were some modest improvements for the Bahá'ís during the term in office of the reformist President Mohammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005. Some Bahá'í students who had previously been expelled from their courses were able to return to education, and some confiscated properties were restored to Bahá'ís. Some Bahá'ís reopened their businesses, while others were issued exit visas (Cole 2005, p. 141).

#### **4.1 EXECUTIONS**

In the period from 1978 to 1998, over 200 Bahá'ís were executed or killed (Forsythe 2009). According to Afshari, the number of executions increased a few years after the revolution. While 47 Bahá'ís were killed between the start of the revolution and June 1981, that number had doubled to 98 by the end of 1984 (Afshari 2008, p. 248).

Among those killed were many prominent individuals with positions in the Bahá'í community. In 1980, all nine members of the Iranian National Spiritual Assembly elected by the Bahá'í community were kidnapped and “disappeared”. They are believed to have been killed. When the Bahá'ís appointed a new national assembly, eight of the nine members were arrested and executed in the following year (IHRDC 2006, p. 23). Members of local assemblies were also hit hard. Seven assembly members in Yazd, seven in Hamadan and all nine assembly members in Tabris were executed. The largest wave of arrests and executions took place in Shiraz, where as many as 31 Bahá'ís were killed between 1978 and 1983 (IHRDC 2006, p. 29-31).

Episodes of executions and killings decreased in the 1980s, but occurred sporadically later. Two Bahá'ís were executed in 1988 and one in 1992 – the latter was accused of espionage, but no evidence to that effect was presented. In 1998 Ruhollah Ruhani was sentenced to death and executed, accused of having converted a Muslim (Afshari 2011, p. 164-165). In some judgments, apostasy was part of the indictment. Zabihollah Mahrami and Musa Talebi were both prosecuted and sentenced to death for apostasy, but after an appeal hearing they were sentenced and executed for espionage (Afshari 2011, p. 165).

#### **4.2 ARRESTS**

More than 1,000 Bahá'ís were arrested in a two-year period from 1982 to 1984. In 1985, over 700 Bahá'ís were imprisoned (Afshari 2008, p. 250). Over the next few years the number declined rapidly, from 200 in 1987 to 129 in 1988 and then down to 15 in 1989 – and it remained at that level in the 1990s (Cole 2005, p. 139-141).

### 4.3 PRESSURE TO RENOUNCE ONE'S FAITH

It seems to have been a systematic strategy on the part of the authorities to try to pressurise Bahá'ís to renounce their faith and convert to Islam. This pressure has taken various forms – from verbal exhortations to physical abuse during imprisonment.

When Bahá'ís became targets of violent attacks and were forced to flee from villages outside Isfahan in January 1979, they were approached by Shiite leaders who encouraged the Bahá'ís to abandon their faith if they wanted to save their lives and properties (IHRDC 2006, p. 19). In prisons, many Bahá'ís were subjected to torture in an attempt to force them to abandon their faith. Among them were ten Bahá'í women who were executed in 1983 for having taught Bahá'í children about matters of faith (Forsythe 2009, p. 135).

It was normal procedure to present the imprisoned Bahá'ís with a document in which they were asked to sign a statement that they would terminate their activities in exchange for being released, something that the Bahá'ís generally refused to do. The document described the Bahá'ís in derogatory terms, as in this example:

I, the undersigned, have undertaken not to have in my possession any book, pamphlet, document, symbol, or picture of this misguided Zionist, espionage group of Bahá'ís. If any of the above-mentioned article...is found on my person or in my home, this will be tantamount to being of those who “war against God”...and the attorney-general will be free to give a decision against me in the manner he sees fit (quoted in Afshari 2008, p. 250).

Many Bahá'ís who had lost economic benefits, such as pensions, were offered the opportunity to get their rights back if they converted to Islam. Here is an example of an official letter that was presented to Bahá'ís:

Based on the information received, you are a Bahá'í and therefore not entitled to a pension payment. However, should you convert to Islam and demonstrate remorse for having been a Bahá'í and further provide this office with proof that you have embraced Islam, steps will be taken to restore pension payments to you (quoted in Afshari 2011, p. 166).

Many Bahá'ís who have been imprisoned have made it clear that they could have been released if they had given in to the demand to renounce their faith. This also applied to prisoners who risked the death penalty. The judge who sentenced ten Bahá'í women to death in 1983 stated to the women: “I ask you to recant and come back to Islam. If you do, I will let you go” (Afshari 2011, p. 163).

This kind of pressure to renounce their faith meant that Bahá'ís were faced with a difficult dilemma. It is a central dogma in the Bahá'í religion that one must not deny one's faith, and Bahá'ís risk being excluded from the Bahá'í community if they break this dogma. For example, registered Bahá'ís who declared themselves to be Muslims in order to be able to leave Iran before 1989 were excluded from the Bahá'í community without any compromise, according to Cole. It also meant that Bahá'ís who denied

their faith to the Iranian authorities and who then sought protection in Western countries were denied confirmation of their membership of the Bahá'í community (Cole 2005, p. 139). The rigorous practice of the principle of not denying one's faith indicates the strict demand for discipline and self-sacrificing loyalty among the members of the religious community.

## 5. FORMALISED DISCRIMINATION

Ayatollah Khomeini was clear in his position that the Bahá'ís would not be able to practise their faith in Islamic Iran. In an interview in February 1979, he stated with regard to the Bahá'ís that “they are a political faction; they are harmful. They will not be accepted” (IHRDC 2006, p. 20). This position has continued to characterise the Islamic Republic's treatment of the Bahá'í community to this day.

### 5.1 CONSTITUTION

The Islamic Republic's Constitution, which was adopted by referendum in October 1979, guarantees protection for the country's recognised religious minorities, but this does not include the Bahá'ís. Article 13 of the new Constitution recognises Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians as the only religious minorities who, within the law, have the right to practise their religious rites and ceremonies and to act in accordance with their own family law and religious education. Bahá'ís are not mentioned in the text of the Constitution.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Article 14 of the Constitution states that the principle of respect for non-Muslims applies to all who refrain from engaging in conspiracy or activity against Islam and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This wording was supposedly a direct reference to the Bahá'ís, who had just been accused of conspiring against the Islamic Republic and of being in league with Zionism (IHRDC 2006, p. 22). The formulations in the Constitution were observed by the public administration and have formed a legal basis for depriving Bahá'ís of elementary civil rights and for systematically discriminating against them in economic, social and political life.

In 1981 the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, adopted guidelines for public employment which established that the penalty for “membership in misguided sects” (a common reference to the Bahá'ís) was “permanent dismissal from governmental employment” (IHRDC 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> Article 13 of the Constitution describes religious minorities: “Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.”

## 5.2 MEMORANDUM OF 1991

Directives were distributed from the highest political leadership to public administration and the apparatus of power that concerned a number of areas of social life, including employment, business, education and religious practices. A key document is the so-called “Bahá’í question memorandum” that was drawn up by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council in 1991 and published in 1993 by the UN Special Rapporteur on Iran. The document, which was marked confidential and signed by Supreme Leader Khamenei, defined “the status of the Bahá’ís within the country’s system.” The overall recommendation was that the government’s dealings with them must be such that “their progress and development are blocked”. It is worth noting that the document, in addition to recommending a number of specific discriminatory and repressive measures, also set limits on how harsh the repression could be. It stated that the Bahá’ís “will not be expelled from the country without reason” and that they “will not be arrested, imprisoned, or penalised without reason” (for an English translation of the memorandum, see BIC 2015a, p. 38). They can be enrolled in schools provided they have not identified themselves as Bahá’ís; and they must be expelled from universities once it becomes known that they are Bahá’ís. It was stressed that the Bahá’ís are not allowed to have a high income, but may have a standard minimum wage. With the memorandum of 1991, the authorities laid down a more uniform standard for the treatment of Bahá’ís, in contrast to the more arbitrary treatment they had been subjected to in the preceding decade, with large variations in different regions (Afshari 2008, p. 262).

Similar directives have also been distributed in various parts of Iran’s public administration in subsequent years. The opposition news agency Saham News published a directive from Iran’s Chief of Police, dated 8 April 2010, which defined the sectors that were prohibited for Bahá’ís. The directive instructed police stations across the country to monitor and restrict Bahá’ís’ activities. Sectors that were prohibited for Bahá’ís included culture, education, finance, media and film, publishing, travel agencies, car hire, jewellery and watches, data and Internet cafes. Furthermore, Bahá’ís were not allowed to own print shops, hotels or teach tailoring skills. The directive reiterates the guideline in the aforementioned memorandum of 1991 that Bahá’ís are not allowed to have a high income, but can be employed on a “standard minimum income” (HRANA 2015).

## 5.3 MEDIA CAMPAIGN AGAINST BAHÁ’Í

The Bahá’í faith and Bahá’ís are generally discussed in very negative terms in Iranian media loyal to the regime. A report by the Bahá’í International Community which analysed the Iranian media’s coverage of Bahá’ís in the period from December 2009 to May 2011 found what it described as “anti-Bahá’í propaganda” in the following forums: 367 articles in print and online media, 58 seminars and conferences, three TV documentaries and three other television programmes, two databases available online,

two websites entirely dedicated to combating the Bahá'í faith, and five official exhibitions (BIC 2011).

Recurring themes in the material included claims that Bahá'ís are anti-Islamic and are actively seeking to undermine Islam, that the Bahá'í faith is a “misguided sect” associated with Satanism, that Bahá'ís are “agents of Zionism,” or spies for Israel and Western countries, that Bahá'ís are morally corrupt, engaging in highly offensive practices, that the Bahá'í faith was created by – or has a historic connection with – imperialist powers, specifically Great Britain or Russia, and that Bahá'ís were influential in the government of the Shah.

While these themes are old, well-known allegations, the report also revealed some new accusations. Among other things, it was claimed that Bahá'ís were the instigators of the rising tide of opposition to the government and that they participated in – or even planned – the so-called Ashura protests in December 2009 in the wake of the unrest surrounding the disputed presidential election earlier that year. It was alleged that Bahá'ís have influence on human rights activists hostile to the regime, and that they control international broadcasters such as the BBC and Voice of America. It is alleged also that Bahá'ís use brainwashing to entice Muslims away from their faith and that they use sexually attractive young women to lure converts.

#### **5.4 PRIMARY EDUCATION**

Children of Bahá'í parents are enrolled in regular primary schools in Iran. According to a representative of the Bahá'í World Centre, Bahá'í children can be enrolled in their local school without any problems, in line with the guidelines for schools that state that Bahá'ís should not be denied access (representative A, interview March 2015). The Bahá'í source stressed, however, that the school registers that they are Bahá'ís on admission, in the same way that they register the religious affiliation of other minority pupils. If the child should reveal his or her religious background to his or her fellow pupils, there is the risk of a reaction from the school, including expulsion.

During a visit to the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, in March 2015, Landinfo interviewed three Iranian-American women who were raised as Bahá'ís in Iran until their families emigrated to the US in 2003 and 2005. The women, who now work as volunteers at the Bahá'í World Centre, wanted to remain anonymous. They had all gone to Iranian primary schools and recounted that there had been considerable pressure from teachers and head teacher when it came to their religious affiliation (interview with F, M and Z. Haifa, March 2015). One of the three women, F, who grew up in Tehran, said that she had been expelled from several schools in Iran because she had revealed in class that her family was Bahá'í. The reason for this was that she always answered if anyone asked her questions about her background. When she was expelled, she always had the opportunity to apply to another school. Since, however, this had been repeated several times, she had to start attending schools increasingly further away from her home.

M, who came from Mazandaran, said that she had been threatened with expulsion because she did not participate in Muslim prayers. She also recounted that she did not talk about her Bahá'í background unless she was asked questions by teachers or pupils.

The third woman, Z from Esfahan, said that she was pressured by teachers to participate in Muslim prayers. Sometimes she hid in the toilet to avoid prayer times. She had an older sister who was expelled from secondary school in 1984 as part of the campaign against Bahá'ís. Her sister had not been allowed to complete her second year in secondary school because she stated that she was Bahá'í. Finally, she had to start at a new school on condition that she did not speak to anyone about her Bahá'í faith. Z said that she herself had received education at home under the auspices of the Bahá'í community. "Secondary school students taught primary school pupils and university lecturers taught secondary school students. The whole scheme was organised by former university employees who had been dismissed," said Z.

The three women had experienced various forms of discrimination at school. For example, they were excluded from the distribution of report cards at the end of the school year. While the other pupils were called up and their grades were announced, with prizes for the best, the Bahá'ís were given their report cards after the ceremony – and they never received any prizes, even if they were the best. M said that in the fifth year the best pupils could ask for a separate examination in order to apply to special schools that were considered better. But M claimed she was denied this opportunity because she was Bahá'í. M went to a class with two other Bahá'í girls with whom she spent a lot of time. "The teachers tried to limit the other pupils' dealings with us. The head teacher summoned my Muslim friends and told them they would receive reduced grades if they associated with us," said M. She added that she had such good grades that she would normally receive a scholarship for further studies, but that her application was rejected because she was Bahá'í.

A Bahá'í publication about the situation of Bahá'í children in Iran reports that children are often subjected to insults, ridicule, harassment and threats of expulsion if they indicate their faith or comment on teachers' false allegations about Bahá'í. The Bahá'í community registered 150 such incidents in ten different cities during the two-month period January-February 2007 and 100 incidents from October 2008 to February 2009 (BIC 2015b).

## **5.5 EXCLUSION FROM HIGHER EDUCATION**

Bahá'ís are systematically excluded from higher education in Iran. In the 1980s, Bahá'ís were required to renounce their faith in order to be admitted to public or private universities. In the aforementioned "Bahá'í question memorandum" it was clarified that Bahá'ís had to be excluded either in the admissions process or during their studies as soon as it became known that they were Bahá'í. After international pressure, this requirement was eased in 2004, and Bahá'í students had the opportunity not to enter their religion on the application form. 800 Bahá'ís participated in the entrance

examinations for the 2006-2007 academic year. 480 students passed the entrance exam, but only 289 were approved. Over half of the 289 were then rejected at a later stage. In the following years Bahá'í students were also rejected after having taken entrance exams. In 2008-2009 Bahá'í students were referred to a website to receive their exam results. On the website they were referred to, they were greeted with the following message: "Error: Incomplete file. Forward correspondence to the Education Assessment Organisation c/o PO Box 31535-3166, Karaj" (HRW 2010). Claims of "incomplete information" have since become a regular excuse on the part of universities for denying Bahá'ís the opportunity to register or for refusing to provide exam results or issue certificates. The International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran has drawn up an (incomplete) list of 217 named students who were denied education in the period 2005-2010, including two in 2005, 19 in 2006, 19 in 2007, 49 in 2008, 58 in 2009 and 70 in 2010 (ICHRI 2010).

Education is traditionally emphasised as being a particularly important issue among Bahá'ís. Bahá'ís have long considered education to be essential for human development and for enabling people to change and to improve their social conditions (Momen 2008, p. 94). The Bahá'ís therefore responded to their exclusion from the education sector by creating their own educational institution, the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE), also known as the Bahá'í Open University, in 1987. The Institute was run by academics who had been dismissed from Iranian educational establishments in the 1980s. Classes were held in private homes and offices with qualified lecturers who wanted to use their skills to educate the younger generation of Bahá'ís. During the 1990s, the Institution had up to 900 enrolled students and a staff of 150 (IHRDC 2006, p. 50). This operation was cracked down upon by the authorities as being illegal. In September 1998, agents from the intelligence ministry raided 500 private homes in various cities and arrested 36 Bahá'ís, four of whom were sentenced to up to ten years in prison for these activities (Afshari 2011, p. 170).

After this raid, the BIHE rebuilt its operation and continued teaching. From 2001 onwards, Revolutionary Guards constantly shut down the education it provided, closed the premises it used and arrested its lecturers, including in Mashad and Shiraz (IHRDC 2006, p. 50). In 2008, the female director of the BIHE for 15 years, Mahvash Sabet, was arrested along with six other Bahá'í leaders, who were then all sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2010.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the activity of the BIHE has gradually been organised through correspondence courses over the Internet. This has made it possible to continue education with a minimum of physical meetings, which has significantly improved the safety of the participants. Students and lecturers/tutors meet a few times a semester, but otherwise communication takes place over the Internet. The telephone is not used, since it is easy to tap (US Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs, n.d.). But the government's

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<sup>2</sup> Profiles of several of the detained BIHE lecturers are available from <http://news.baha'i.org/human-rights/iran/education/profiles>

attempts to stop the operation of the BIHE have in no way diminished. New raids were carried out in May 2011 on 39 homes of BIHE lecturers in Tehran, Karaj, Esfahan and Shiraz. At the same time, the Iran Students' News Agency quoted an announcement from the Ministry of Science and Technology stating that "the online university BIHE has not received any ministry permits for operation, and all its activities are illegal" (University World News 2011). Several of those arrested were sentenced to prison terms of four to five years. In June 2014, another BIHE lecturer, Azita Rafizadeh, was sentenced to four years in prison for her work with the BIHE. She would have been able to escape prosecution if she had agreed to stop working for the BIHE. Her husband, Peyman Kushk-Baghi, was sentenced to five years in prison in May 2015. Both were convicted of "membership in the illegal and misguided Bahá'í group with the aim of acting against national security through illegal activities at the BIHE educational institute" (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016, pp. 17-18).<sup>3</sup>

While several government officials have denied that Bahá'ís are discriminated against because of their faith, the powerful Ayatollah Bojnourdi confirmed that Bahá'ís do not have access to the universities. In December 2014 Bojnourdi stated the following regarding Bahá'ís: "They still have human rights but they cannot use privileges such as going to university in Iran" (HRC 2015, paragraph 107).

## 5.6 ECONOMIC DISCRIMINATION

The systematic exclusion of Bahá'ís from public sector employment has hit the highly educated, such as doctors and lawyers, particularly hard. After the Revolution, highly qualified academics and scientists who had previously worked as researchers had found themselves obliged to take menial jobs, such as driving lorries or selling flowers (Afshari 2011, p. 167). The aforementioned memorandum from 1991 and later directives that define which industries Bahá'ís are permitted to engage in have further drastically limited Bahá'ís' economic opportunities. The pressure to block Bahá'ís' economic development accelerated during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from 2005 onwards and has continued after the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016, p. 17).

A report from the BIC entitled "The economic oppression of Iran's Bahá'ís" describes a number of examples of closures of shops, dismissals and cancellations of business licences or threats to revoke licences. The BIC recorded 780 such cases and similar instances of "economic persecution" of Bahá'ís from 2007 to 2015. The report also shows how exclusion from higher education and from employment in the public sector and large parts of the private sector has affected the Bahá'ís' economic conditions (BIC 2015a). It is believed that the comprehensive anti-Bahá'í propaganda presented in Iranian media has had a negative effect on Bahá'í-owned businesses, because the

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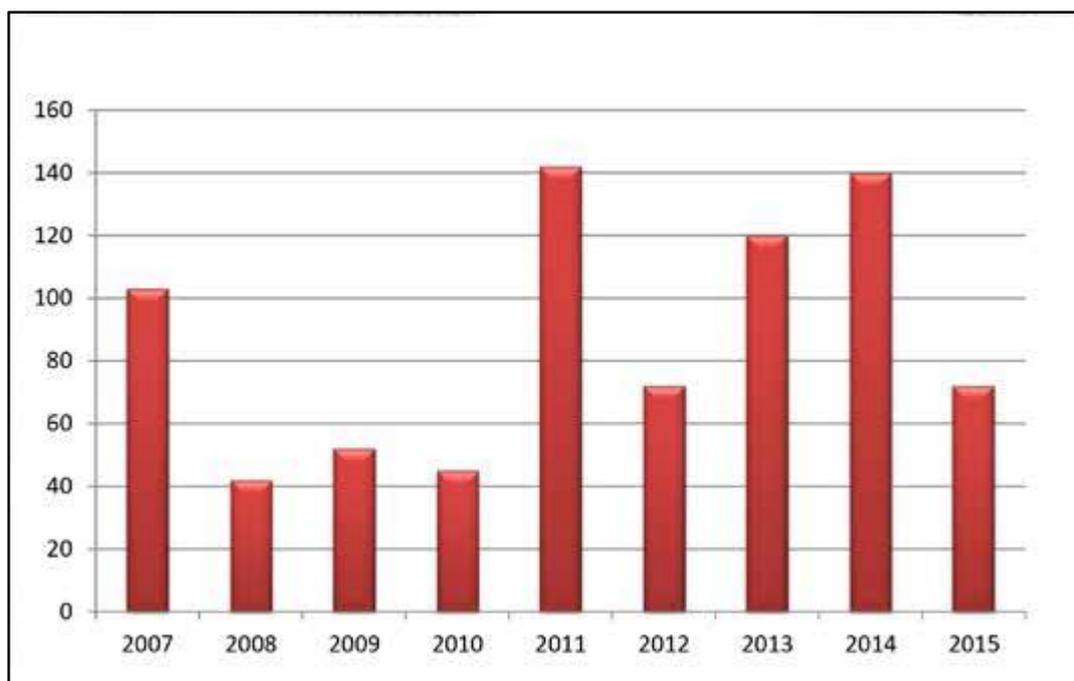
<sup>3</sup> Profiles of the 17 arrested BIHE instructors have been published by the Bahá'í World News Service, see BWNS, n.d.

public are encouraged to refrain from dealing with Bahá'ís. The report further notes that the exclusion of Bahá'ís from higher education has consigned them to low-paying jobs or unemployment (p. 2).

The reason for most shop closures that have been implemented in recent years seems to be that the owners have kept the shop closed on Bahá'í holy days. Some shops have been reopened after a short time and then closed again. One shop owner reported that he had been instructed to sign a letter as a condition for reopening his shop. The content of the letter was, however, highly derogatory about the Bahá'í faith, so he refused to sign (p. 4).

In 2013, 16 Bahá'í-owned shops in Tonekabon were closed by the authorities, and in October 2014 an additional 80 Bahá'í-owned shops were closed and sealed in the cities of Kerman, Rafsanjan and Jiroft, with banners stating that the shops had been closed due to “violations of trading rules” as a result of remaining closed in observance of Bahá'í holidays. Subsequently, the shop owners were asked to sign a statement that they would observe the calendar of the country and otherwise coordinate operations and hours with the intelligence body Amaken, the Public Places Supervision Office, whose task is to ensure that Islamic norms are observed in public (and sometimes private) areas. Later, some of the shop keepers were able to negotiate an agreement that they only needed to inform Amaken and the trade unions about which days they planned to close on. Accordingly, the shops were then reopened in January 2015. But, just a few months later, Amaken was back in the same cities and again closed 35 Bahá'í-owned shops (p. 4-5).

On 22 June 2016, the BIC reported to the UN Human Rights Council that 27 shops owned by Bahá'ís in Orumieh and six in Sanandaj in north-western Iran had been closed and sealed by the authorities after the shops had been closed for a Bahá'í holiday (BIC 2016e).



Statistics showing the number of recorded cases of economic discrimination and harassment against Bahá'ís, including the closure of shops or companies, dismissals and threats against employees by the authorities. Source: BIC 2015a, p. 4.

When the government closes larger companies, it also affects employees who are not Bahá'ís. In 2012, a Bahá'í-owned business distributing hygiene products in Tehran was shut down, resulting in the dismissal of 70 employees. Two factories in Semnan were closed that year. One, which manufactured blinds, had 51 employees, 26 of whom were not Bahá'ís (BIC 2015a, p. 5).

In 2014, optical companies in Tabriz, Semnan and Tehran were also subjected to closure and confiscation of their stock (p. 5, 9).

In some cases, the purpose of government actions appears to be to ruin successful Bahá'ís. A Bahá'í who had established a fruit farm with 40,000 fruit trees, after his brick factory had been closed in the 1980s, was imprisoned and then in 2010 the Revolutionary Guards came with bulldozers and destroyed the irrigation system and clogged the wells. In 2015, a farmhouse on the land was also razed to the ground (p. 8).

In addition to raids and closures of businesses, Bahá'ís often experience additional bureaucratic obstacles, such as increased processing time and unfair rejection of applications for permits and licences (p. 5). Bank loans were further systematically denied to Bahá'ís operating businesses (Afshari 2011, p. 125).

## 5.7 LEGAL DISCRIMINATION

The status of the Bahá'ís as a non-recognised religious minority and as “infidels” has far-reaching legal implications, in terms of criminal law, family law and economic rights. The most dramatic consequence is that Bahá'ís are explicitly excluded from the protection of the authorities in cases of crime, violence and abuse in all forms. The law will not provide protection for Bahá'ís even in cases of murder. On the contrary, according to sharia law, Bahá'í blood is considered mohbah (or mobah), meaning that Bahá'ís may be killed without criminal liability for the perpetrator (USCIRF 2012).

The principle of impunity for the killing of Bahá'ís is observed by Iranian courts, and no perpetrator has been apprehended or punished for assault, harassment or violence against Bahá'ís. In September 1993, a judge in Tehran who found two Muslim brothers guilty of burning a man to death refused to convict them of murder or award blood money to the relatives because the victim was a Bahá'í (Esposito & Voll 1996, p. 94). The perpetrators, however, were sentenced to 18 months’ “corrective” imprisonment for disturbing public order (BIC 2013, p. 30).

Even after the Expediency Council ruled in 2004 that non-Muslims had the right to the same amount of blood money as Muslims, Bahá'ís remained excluded from this right. The amendment was intended only for the recognised minorities of Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians (USCIRF 2012, p. 5). This can be interpreted as a call to kill Bahá'ís, commented a representative of the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa (representative B, interview March 2015).

In compensation cases, Iranian courts have ruled that Bahá'ís are not entitled to the compensation they would receive if they were Muslims (Cole 2005, p. 141). This principle was not only observed in cases of conflict and murder, but also with regard to accidents. In the event of a traffic accident in which a Muslim caused the death of a Bahá'í by negligence, the victim’s family would not receive any compensation. Instead, the offender would have to pay a sum to a state fund (Afshari 2011, p. 167).

Bahá'ís have also experienced discrimination in hospital treatment. In a case in which a Bahá'í needed an eye transplant after a burn injury (which was caused by the arson of a Bahá'í-owned factory), the local Islamic committee decided that the eye of a Muslim could not be donated to a Bahá'í (Afshari 2011, p. 167).

As Bahá'í marriages were not recognised, Bahá'í couples could be charged with extramarital sex, and the person officiating at the ceremony could be charged with procurement. Such accusations, however, were more common in the 1980s than in the 90s. In terms of inheritance, property went to the state if there were no Muslim heirs in the family (Cole 2005, p. 142, 155).

## 5.8 MILITARY SERVICE

There is universal conscription in Iran, and Bahá'ís are required to perform military service like other citizens. According to the Bahá'í faith, Bahá'ís must avoid

participation in war and should seek exemption from military service if possible. But, based on the principle of loyalty to the country's laws, they accept military service in Iran. According to a representative of the Bahá'í World Centre, Bahá'ís normally perform military service in Iran, but can apply for exemption on the same basis as other Iranians, i.e. for medical reasons or because of their family situation (representative A, interview March 2015).

## 6. ARRESTS

The number of reported arrests of Bahá'ís has varied considerably over time. In the first half of the 2000s, the number of imprisoned Bahá'ís was less than five. However, during President Ahmadinejad's two terms in office from 2005 to 2013, the number of Bahá'í prisoners rose from under five to over a hundred. According to HRW, there were 114 Bahá'ís in Iranian prisons as of September 2013 (HRW 2014a). In January 2014, six months after the election of the more liberal President Hassan Rouhani, the UN Special Rapporteur reported that no less than 136 Bahá'ís were imprisoned. Subsequently, the Special Rapporteur documented a gradual decline: 126 prisoners in August 2014, 100 prisoners in March 2015 and 80 prisoners at the end of 2015 (UNSG 2014; HRC 2015; HRC 2016). Bahá'í sources indicated that the number was also 80 in May 2016. In total, 820 Bahá'ís were arrested between 2005 and 2016, according to the BIC (2016d).

The increased pressure on the Bahá'ís in 2005 was preceded by a secret directive from the headquarters of the armed forces – on instructions from the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei – to the Intelligence Ministry, the Revolutionary Guards, the police force and other agencies to step up the monitoring of the Bahá'ís. All Bahá'ís should be identified and their activities reported to military headquarters, according to the directive, which was dated October 2005 (BIC 2006; Zabihi-Moghaddam, p. 14).

In March and May 2008, the authorities took action against a group of seven Bahá'ís who acted as an informal administration for the Bahá'ís in Iran. The seven include two women and five men: Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naemi, Saeid Rezaie, Mahvash Sabet, Behrouz Tavakkoli and Vahid Tizfahm. The group, often referred to as Yaran (the friends), functioned openly as a liaison between the Bahá'ís and the authorities. The seven were arrested and detained without charge for more than nine months. In January 2010, each of them was sentenced to 20 years in prison. Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, who defended them in court, has said that there was no evidence to support the charges against them, which included spying for Israel and the USA, actions against national security and propaganda against the system of the Islamic Republic (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016, p. 15). In November 2015, the sentencing was reduced to ten years for all seven Bahá'í leaders, in accordance with the changes in the new Penal Code that had been introduced in 2013 (BIC 2016c).

On 31 July 2012, the intelligence service Ettelaat raided 20 Bahá'í homes and businesses in the cities of Yazd, Esfahan, Arak, Shahinshahr, Vilashahr and Kerman. Some of the victims of the action described to Human Rights Watch how intelligence service agents raided their homes and seized their assets, identity papers, bank statements and religious materials, before arresting them and taking them to an interrogation centre in Yazd (HRW 2014b).

In the period June to August 2014, Bahá'í sources reported four arrests in Mashhad, one in Vilashahr, four in Shiraq and five in Tehran. All those arrested were named by the source (BIC 2016d).

13 Bahá'ís were arrested in Hamadan during a two-week raid against Bahá'í homes in the city of Hamdan in April 2015. Most were released on bail of between 8,000 and 20,000 US dollars (BIC 2016d).

Bahá'í sources reported that 20 unnamed Bahá'ís were arrested on 15 November 2015 in the cities of Tehran, Isfahan and Mashhad (BIC 2015b).

24 Bahá'ís who were arrested in 2012 and 2013 were sentenced to prison terms of between six and eleven years in January 2016 by a revolutionary court in Golestan province. They were convicted of membership of and activity for the Bahá'í community. In the judgment, it is confirmed that the Bahá'ís' belief in their prophet – the Báb – is in itself regarded as propaganda against the regime of the Islamic Republic (BIC 2016a).

Bahá'ís have experienced pressure to move away from certain areas in connection with raids on their homes. After raids in 2013 on 14 Bahá'í homes in the city of Abadeh, in which Bahá'í books, CDs and computers were confiscated, several of the Bahá'ís were urged during their interrogation to leave town in order to avoid attacks from the locals. During questioning, they were told by intelligence agents that the local residents “don't like you” and that “when you are on the street, they might attack you and your children with knives.” The Bahá'ís themselves, however, did not think they had any problems with their neighbours and that it was the government that was creating an atmosphere of fear in order to pressurise Bahá'ís into leaving (BWNS 2013).

## **6.1 TREATMENT IN PRISONS**

In line with the increase in the number of imprisoned Bahá'ís, several cases of physical and mental abuse of Bahá'í prisoners have been reported. In November 2012, 12 Bahá'í prisoners wrote a formal letter to the public prosecutor in Golestan province in which they reported that they had been subjected to physical abuse by interrogators in Amir Abad Prison. They had been beaten, kicked, tied to the wall in a painful way and kept out in the cold rain for several hours. In addition, they had been threatened in various ways. The objective of these methods would have been to obtain forced confessions.

The contents of the letter became known in March 2016, when the case was published by the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. The public prosecutor did not reply to the letter (ICHRI 2016). The 12 prisoners were among the group of 24 Bahá'ís who were sentenced to several years in prison in January 2016 (see above).

Lack of access to medical care for inmates is a common accusation against Iranian prison authorities. In March 2015, the UN Special Rapporteur for Iran reported that two female Bahá'ís, Nasim Ashrafi and Shamis Mohair, were denied adequate medical treatment while incarcerated in Evin prison in Tehran (HRC 2015).

Furthermore, various forms of harassment and discrimination against Bahá'í prisoners have been reported during their incarceration. A former inmate of Adelabad prison recounted that his laundry could not be washed with that of other prisoners, because Bahá'ís were considered “unclean” and that he had to wash his clothes on his own in a bucket in the cell. When his family delivered fruit to him, the fruit was first distributed to the other prisoners, and the poorest was left to him (IHRDC 2015, p. 32).

## **7. VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT**

In recent years, a number of cases of various types of violence and attacks on Bahá'ís and their properties have been reported. A report by the Bahá'í International Community in 2013 documented 52 cases of violent attacks by unknown assailants or government officials, 49 cases of arson, 42 cases of the desecration of graves, as well as 52 cases of torture or solitary confinement in prisons. The incidents in the report are accompanied by the time and place, and many of these cases are documented with pictures (BIC 2013).

In several cases, arson and stabbing was carried out by masked assailants. The BIC reported a stabbing that injured three Bahá'ís in February 2014 in the city of Birjand in South Khorasan Province and four cases of arson or attacks with firebombs against Bahá'ís homes in the provinces of Yazd and Hamadan in October and November 2014 (BIC 2015a). In several of the reported cases, violence has been accompanied by pressure and intimidation in order to get Bahá'ís to move away from their home towns or refrain from contact with Muslims. For example, threatening letters were sent to 20 Bahá'í homes and businesses in the city of Rafsanjan after a series of arsons in 2010, which stated that the attacks would cease if the owners stopped interacting with Muslims (BIC 2013, p. 4).

## 7.1 MURDER

While the government has avoided death sentences and executions of Bahá'ís in recent years, there have been cases of killings by unknown assailants and suspicious deaths (Zabihi-Moghaddam 2016, p. 14).

On 24 August 2013, Ataollah Rezvani, a prominent member of the Bahá'í community in Bandar Abbas in southern Iran, was found shot dead in his car. The murder occurred after repeated threats and harassment by intelligence agents and unknown assailants. The threats took the form of attempts to force Rezvani and his family to move away from the city (BIC 2016d).

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote that the murder of Atoallah Rezvani was the first time in several years that a Bahá'í had been shot and killed for his faith in Iran (USCIRF 2014).

The Bahá'í International Community, however, asserted that at least four other Bahá'ís had been killed and another five had died in suspicious circumstances between 2005 and 2012 (BIC 2013). In an e-mail to Landinfo, the BIC's office in Geneva reported details of seven cases of murder of Bahá'ís between 2007 and 2013, with references to the time and place of the killings, and with two of the victims being named. Among those killed were three elderly persons who were assaulted in or near their home, one death in prison and one case of an allegedly deliberate collision between a motor vehicle and two Bahá'ís. Several of the victims had previously received death threats. According to the BIC, there are also a number of cases of homicide in which the BIC cannot disclose any details because the victims' family have not consented to disclosure (e-mail from BIC, Geneva, 19 October 2015).

## 7.2 EXPULSIONS

There have been several cases of violent campaigns against local Bahá'í communities with the aim of expelling the residents from the area. In the village of Kata outside the city of Yasuj in the south-western province of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, many of the 50 local Bahá'í families fled from their homes in 2000 after several years of attacks and arson by local mobs. The provincial authorities decided that the properties of the fleeing Bahá'ís were to be confiscated and the proceeds from them would accrue to the local Islamic village council (BIC 2015a, p. 11).

In 2010, 50 abandoned houses that had belonged to Bahá'ís were demolished by bulldozers in the village of Ivel in Mazandaran Province. 20 Bahá'í families were put on buses and forcibly ejected from the area in 1983, but many of them came back to Ivel each summer to work the land. In 2007, seven of the houses were burned down, and the Bahá'ís were subjected to violence and threats (BIC 2013, p. 19). The residents had thus been subjected to a sustained campaign over many years before their homes were finally demolished.

### **7.3 DESECRATION OF GRAVES**

Over the past decade, several Bahá'í cemeteries have been subjected to desecration and destruction. The attacks included the burning down of mortuaries, demolition and crushing of tombstones, cutting down of plants, graffiti and the exhumation of corpses. The Bahá'í International Community reported 42 such incidents from 2005 to 2013 (BIC 2013; BIC 2014).

The Bahá'í cemetery in Yazd was almost completely destroyed by heavy vehicles in 2005. In 2007 the Bahá'í cemetery in Najafabad in Isfahan Province was attacked by bulldozers. 95 graves were completely destroyed. Bahá'ís were subsequently refused permission to use the cemetery. The Bahá'í cemetery in Semnan was destroyed in 2013 by municipal bulldozers scooping earth over the graves and the cemetery in Sanandaj was partially destroyed in December 2013 (BIC 2016d).

In some cases, cemeteries have been destroyed by governmental building projects. In Shiraz in 2014, the Revolutionary Guards started the construction of a sports and cultural centre over a Bahá'í cemetery that had been established in the 1920s, but which was confiscated by the authorities in 1983. 950 Bahá'ís are buried there, including ten women who were hanged in 1983 when they refused to renounce their Bahá'í faith. The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion has described the destruction in Shiraz as unacceptable and as a premeditated violation of religious freedom (OHCHR 2014).

## **8. BAHÁ'Í ACITIVITY IN TODAY'S IRAN**

It is uncertain how many Bahá'ís are living in Iran today. After a register of members was confiscated by the authorities in 1979 and the Bahá'í administration was dissolved, even the Bahá'í community itself does not have any central overview of membership in the country today. Bahá'í sources state that there were 300,000 registered members before the Revolution (representative A, interview March 2015). Many sources, including the BIC, the UN Special Rapporteur and the U.S. State Department operate with an estimate of 300,000 Bahá'ís in Iran even today.

Several academic sources claim, however, that the figure was significantly lower before the revolution. Sanasarian (2000, p. 53) emphasises that the figures are uncertain and refers to estimates between 150,000 and 300,000.

### **8.1 PRACTICE OF FAITH**

In Iran, the Bahá'ís have not been able to maintain a formal organisational structure since the authorities banned all organised Bahá'í activity in August 1983. The Islamic public prosecutor declared that all administrative institutions within the Bahá'í

community had to be dissolved and that all public meetings were prohibited. Bahá'í representatives in Tehran responded that they would comply with the order, and the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran then dissolved itself (Afshari 2008, p. 254; IHRDC 2006, p. 34). This meant that the Bahá'ís' elected assembly and administrative bodies, which had a central role in the lives of its members and the religious community, ceased to exist.

In a conversation with Landinfo, Dr Joshua Lincoln, Secretary-General of the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, stressed that the dissolution of the Bahá'í institutions was real: "When we say we dissolved the administration in 1983, that is the truth." According to the Secretary-General, this is in line with the Bahá'í principle of obeying the laws of the country in which one lives. The properties and premises of the Bahá'í community were confiscated by the authorities – without any form of compensation. After the formal institutions had been closed, an ad hoc committee was initially set up, in agreement with the authorities, to attend to the basic tasks in the religious community, such as marriage, divorce and children's activities. When the seven members of this committee were arrested and sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2010, this restricted the activities of the religious community even further. The Secretary-General explained that "in a context where the administration helping the religious community disappears, the area of community life narrows, and finally becomes restricted to the home."

The three Iranian-American Bahá'ís, F, M and Z, who are described in Chapter 5.4, told Landinfo that the Bahá'ís in Iran performed devotions, held meetings and carried out religious education for children in each other's homes. They met to socialise every nineteenth day, the so-called Nineteen Day Feast.

In other respects, the Bahá'ís stated that they kept a low profile externally. This meant that they did not declare their faith, unless they were asked about it or in contexts in which they were required to specify their religious affiliation. More than one of them had experienced being visited by intelligence agents in their home, and one had an uncle who had been killed in the 1980s. Woman F, who had lived in Tehran, related that her family had once been visited by the Basij militia who ransacked their home and confiscated some Bahá'í books. "They said they had to report that we were spies for the USA," said the woman, who remembered the incident as being terrifying. All the women were taught to read extensively and there was a lot of Bahá'í literature at home. Z recounted that it was difficult to get hold of Bahá'í books, so she had written out several texts and books by hand. She said that they stored the books in hiding so that they were not visible to visitors (interview with F, M and Z, Haifa, March 2015).

## **8.2 MARRIAGE**

When the Bahá'í institutions in Iran were closed down in 1983, the consequences extended far beyond the purely organisational. Since family law was regulated within

religious denominations, the Bahá'ís also lost the institutions that could administer family law matters, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance.

A representative of the BIC at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, who is himself of Iranian origin and who grew up in Iran, explained to Landinfo that as long as the Bahá'í institutions were operational, the Local Spiritual Assemblies issued marriage certificates. Bahá'ís have, however, continued to conduct marriage ceremonies in accordance with their traditions, even after the assemblies were dissolved. After the ceremony now, a document is issued which resembles the assembly marriage certificate, but which is only signed by family members and witnesses who are present during the ceremony (representative B, interview March 2015).

The challenge, however, has been that the government has never recognised Bahá'í documents as having any legal status. Previously, Bahá'ís could not register their marriage with the authorities, so that it was not stated in a Bahá'í's identity documents that he or she was married.

After 2000, however, the government introduced a scheme that makes it possible for Bahá'ís to register their marriage in their own identity papers. This is done by the newlywed couple going to a notary public and declaring that they have undergone a Bahá'í marriage. They will not be issued with a marriage certificate, but the notary will issue a document that the couple can take to the Population Registry, so that the fact that they are married can then be entered on both partners' ID document ("shenasnameh"). The authorities thus respect the marriage as being legally valid. Children of a Bahá'í couple are therefore not considered as having been born out of wedlock, as was the case previously. The partners may also act as a married couple with respect to the outside world, e.g. they may book a hotel room together (representative A, interview March 2015).

It happens that Bahá'ís marry non-Bahá'ís in Iran. In these cases, it is customary to hold two ceremonies. For example, if a Bahá'í marries a Muslim, the couple will first have a Muslim ceremony. Then, the couple will also hold a private Bahá'í ceremony. The couple will then have a Muslim marriage contract and the marriage will be registered in the usual way in ID documents and public records (representative A, interview March 2015).

### **8.3 DIVORCE**

There are detailed procedures for conducting a divorce within the Bahá'í community, based on the writings of the prophet Bahá'u'lláh. Among other things, the couple must live apart for one year before the divorce can be completed. However, there is a problem in that there are no courts that can handle divorces for Bahá'ís if the couple does not agree to separate. If one partner opposes the divorce, the other will not have the opportunity to take the case to court. Thus, the partner who opposes the divorce can prevent the other partner from remarrying, because the marriage will continue to be registered (representative A, interview March 2015).

Bahá'ís who were married in Iran before 2000, will not be registered as married in the Iranian Population Registry. They will therefore not be required to provide any documentation of their divorce before they can remarry.

#### **8.4 RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LOCAL POPULATION**

Iranian political and religious leaders have described Bahá'ís as being “unclean” and have exhorted the population not to have anything to do with them – either professionally or socially. Although such utterances have undoubtedly contributed to, and provided a justification for, the practice of religious intolerance towards Bahá'ís, many Bahá'ís have stated that it is not public opinion that is the problem, but the authorities. Landinfo spoke with a business owner in Tehran who said that the Bahá'ís are well regarded by many Iranians and that instructions from the authorities about not having anything to do with them have been circumvented by many people in the business community. For example, when his company had received an order to dismiss all Bahá'ís, he was forced to let a Bahá'í employee go, but continued to use his services on a freelance basis.

The aforementioned Bahá'ís who grew up in Iran said that the vast majority of their Muslim neighbours were friendly towards them, although there were exceptions (interview with F, M and Z, Haifa, March 2015). M, from Mazandaran north of Tehran, recounted that everyone in her neighbourhood respected her family, with the exception of one of the neighbouring families, who never said hello to them. This negative attitude of one neighbour was condemned by the other Muslim neighbours. She also had good contacts with Muslim friends when growing up, even though the school was trying to prevent such contact. Z, who grew up in Esfahan, also found that some neighbours would not say hello to her. She had seen graffiti directed against Bahá'ís in the streets, such as “Death to Bahá'ís” and “Bahá'ís are kafirs (infidels).” F related that her family lived near a church in a predominantly Christian neighbourhood in Tehran. She felt that it was safer because the Christians had less prejudice towards the Bahá'ís than the Muslims did (interview, Haifa 2015).

It has in recent years occurred that high-profile religious leaders have made critical comments about the official position towards the Bahá'í minority. The well-known Iranian dissident Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri issued a fatwa (a legal-religious declaration) in 2008 in which he advocated that the Bahá'ís should be given full civil rights (ICHRI 2014). It also attracted attention when another religious authority and critic of the regime, Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, publicly expressed condolences to the family of the Bahá'í Ataollah Rezvani who was killed in Bandar Abbas in 2013. The following year he handed over, as a gift to the Bahá'ís, a work of calligraphy that he had drawn of a quotation from the Bahá'í holy book. He explained that the gift was a symbolic gesture to show sympathy with a group that has suffered from blind religious prejudice (Mogra 2014).

It attracted even greater attention in the Iranian media when in May 2016 Faezeh Hashemi, a former parliamentarian and the daughter of ex-president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, visited one of the seven imprisoned Bahá'í leaders, Fariba Kamalabadi, who was at home on temporary furlough from incarceration (Naji 2016).

## **8.5 CERTIFICATES**

The Bahá'í community in several countries, including Norway, can issue certificates that an Iranian citizen is considered to be a Bahá'í. If an Iranian applies to the Bahá'í National Spiritual Assembly in Norway to obtain confirmation that he or she is a Bahá'í, enquiries will, if necessary, be made via contacts in Iran. If the Local Spiritual Assembly in their hometown can confirm their activity and affiliation, a certificate will be issued. As there are no membership registers for Bahá'ís in Iran, this is not based on any formal membership, but local Bahá'ís will be able to confirm whether a person has been participating in the Bahá'í community and is considered to be a Bahá'í (representative A, interview March 2015).

## **9. DEVELOPMENTS AFTER ROUHANI**

Shortly after his inauguration as President in August 2013, Hassan Rouhani launched a “Citizens’ Rights Charter” which gave the impression of a more liberal policy on freedom of speech and freedom of association (CUNY Human Rights in Iran Unit 2013). The document stressed that all Iranian citizens are entitled to protection and recognition of their religious identity. It was also mentioned that the government should preserve historical monuments of all religious groups, that discrimination regarding access to public services based on religious affiliation is prohibited, and that the right of parents to educate their children according to their faith should be respected. The Bahá'í faith, however, was not mentioned in the document. It was nonetheless noted that the right to practice one’s religion should be respected within the framework of applicable laws. This can be interpreted as meaning that the aforementioned rights do not apply to the Bahá'ís, since the Constitution of the Islamic Republic does not recognise the Bahá'ís as a religious minority.

In practical politics, there are no signs of any easing of the pressure on the Bahá'ís on the part of the authorities. In its annual report for 2014, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) wrote that the situation of the Bahá'ís has continued to deteriorate, even after Hassan Rouhani took over as President in 2013.

The negative depiction of Bahá'ís in Iranian media has also continued in recent years. During 2014 and 2015, the Bahá'í International Community registered 8,100 cases of what it described as “anti-Bahá'í propaganda” in official or semi-official media (BIC 2016d).

Furthermore, the president's liberal rhetoric was in direct conflict with the signals being given by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who sharpened his tone towards the Bahá'ís after Rouhani was elected. On 1 August 2013, Khamenei issued a fatwa urging all Iranians to avoid having anything to do with members of the banned Bahá'í sect. This fatwa has been interpreted as a signal of more stringent restrictions on the Bahá'í community and contains an implicit invitation to other parts of the apparatus of power to follow up on the signal. This statement joins a string of similar statements made by other religious leaders (AP 2013).

In a 2014 report, the UK Home Office stressed that the situation of Bahá'ís has deteriorated significantly over the past few years. While the Home Office's guidelines from 2006 indicated that the Bahá'ís were not generally at risk of persecution, this had changed by 2014, when the Home Office believed that the Bahá'ís faced a general risk of ill-treatment. Reference was made to an increasing number of reports of violent incidents against Bahá'ís, attacks on property, destruction of religious monuments and cemeteries, and systematic closure of businesses (UK Home Office 2014, p. 5).

The UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran, Ahmed Shaheed, has for several years been voicing strong criticism of Iran's treatment of religious minorities, and expressed particular concern about the discrimination against the Bahá'ís. After Shaheed's report in March 2016 (HRC 2016), which highlighted that the systematic harassment, discrimination and arrests of Bahá'ís are continuing without any signs of improvement, the UN Human Rights Council resolved to extend the Special Rapporteur's mandate (BIC 2016b).

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