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Mina Yazdani

Eastern Kentucky University, [mina.yazdani@eku.edu](mailto:mina.yazdani@eku.edu)

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## Higher Education under the Islamic Republic: The Case of the Baha'is<sup>1</sup>

Mina Yazdani

Eastern Kentucky University

### Abstract

This article explores the Islamic Republic of Iran's campaign to deny Baha'is, members of Iran's largest religious minority, access to higher education. It outlines the contours of this campaign: In the early 1980s, the newly established Islamic government began dismissing Baha'i students from universities; later and up to the early 2000s, it forbade them from even participating in the nation-wide university entrance exam; finally, in order to divert growing international attention from its campaign, it began admitting a small number of Baha'i students into universities, though in more recent years, it has expelled the majority of these students before they have completed their studies. Furthermore, this article surveys the government's attempts to shut down the educational network Baha'is have formed in order to provide higher education to their youth, all the while claiming to the international community that Baha'is exercise the right of higher education. Situating the government's campaign to deny higher education within the context of a systematic, government-led campaign of persecution that has spanned decades, this paper petitions Agamben's category of *Homo Sacer* and classifies Baha'is as a group that has been forcibly reduced by the sovereign to the state of *bare life* (*zoé*) outside the country's legitimate social life (*bios* or *political life*). It further suggests that the Iranian government's treatment of Baha'is should be understood within the context of an inherent identity dilemma facing the Islamic Republic: Is the Islamic Republic a modern state that is concerned with the well-being of all of its citizens, or is it an ideological entity that will deliberately deprive members of a minority community of one of their most fundamental human rights?

It was a sunny day in Shiraz, late April 1980. I was a fourth-year medical student at Shiraz (formerly Pahlavi) University, Iran. Our major course that year was physiology, which I enjoyed immensely. I had entered medical school in the fall of 1976 with the hope of entering psychiatry. However, the erudition of the internists teaching physiology made me wonder whether I should study internal medicine instead. On that beautiful spring day in the city known for its poets, flowers and birds, we had nearly completed the year-long course and were about to commence the final module on neuroscience, to cover not only physiology but also the anatomy of the nervous system. The latter had been left out of last year's anatomy course, which had been shortened due to strikes during the 1979 Revolution. As the professor started distributing the thick handouts, I told myself, "whether I end up entering internal medicine or psychiatry, this is an extremely important part of the course for me—I should do my best in this module." I never got a chance to study those thick neuroscience handouts. And I never became a psychiatrist, or an internist, or a physician.

That week, another "revolution" began: Some of our zealous classmates tried to shut down the school. They jumped on the desks and shouted slogans against the "American" elements in the university. They stood in front of the door in a threatening manner preventing other students from entering the class. In other faculties, like that of literature, those who wanted to attend classes were violently attacked. Soon we realized that this was the beginning of what was to be called the "Cultural Revolution." Within three days, the university was closed in order to be "cleansed" of unwanted elements.

A year and a half later, an announcement was published in the bulletin of the Islamists of the university about the imminent, yet gradual, re-opening of the university and the categories of students that would not be permitted to return.<sup>2</sup> The second in their list of those to be dismissed was "the misguided sects which, according to the consensus of Muslims, have abandoned Islam"

(*Bultan-i jihad-i daneshgahi-yi*, 1981). I knew enough about the lexicon of the Shi'ic clerics to understand that by "misguided sects", they meant the Baha'is. Beginning in November 1981, they re-opened our class, but students had to re-enroll. There were initially four Baha'i students in our class. One previously left Iran at the beginning of the revolution and another became a Muslim like her deceased mother. The other student, Nayyir al-Din Anvari, whose father had been executed months earlier for being a Baha'i, and I were denied re-enrollment. We were dismissed because we were Baha'is. Other universities re-opened gradually; but most took three years before fully resuming their activities. Close to a thousand<sup>3</sup> Baha'i university students and professors throughout the country were expelled.<sup>4</sup>

A few years later, a creative process was initiated by the dismissed Baha'i university professors to teach not only the expelled university students, but also the increasing number of the Baha'i high school graduates. Their initiative, an unprecedented intra-community network of learning, came to be known as the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). Meanwhile, younger generations of Baha'is were barred from entering Iranian universities, year after year. This paper discusses the deprivation of the Baha'is of Iran from higher education,<sup>5</sup> placing it in the larger context of the Islamic Republic's identity dilemma:<sup>6</sup> a modern state versus an ideological entity. The former requires equal protection and equality for all of its citizens; the latter, the strict implementation of a narrow reading of Shari'a law in which Baha'is, as so-called heretics, have no social rights. The conflict between these two identities leads to a duplicitous stance: externally portraying the face of a modern state claiming Baha'is are not discriminated against while in reality depriving them of their civil rights by all means practicable—thereby excluding generations of Baha'is from higher education, halting their progress, and preventing them from intermingling with other Iranians in academia. Notwithstanding such efforts by the civil authorities, the Baha'is have been able to successfully execute their agency in manners compatible with the principles they uphold.

Before proceeding, a short introduction to the Baha'i religion and an overview of the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran under the Islamic Republic are in order.

## **Who Are the Baha'is?**

Baha'is are the followers of Mirza Husayn 'Ali, known as Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), whom they believe,<sup>7</sup> together with his forerunner Siyyid Ali Muhammad, known as the Bab (1819-1850), inaugurated a new dispensation in world religions.<sup>8</sup> Baha'is believe the world needs a spiritual rejuvenation every one thousand or so years through the appearance of a Manifestation of God, whose coming heralds a fundamental change in the world. The teachings of each Manifestation of God are in accordance with the ever-changing level of understanding of the people of his time. Ontologically, the Manifestations of God are all one and the same; Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad the Bab, and Baha'u'llah are all recognized as Manifestations of the same higher spiritual reality, and this spiritual reality intermediates between God and humankind. Oneness of God, Oneness of the Manifestations of God (hence, oneness of the core of their religions), and oneness of humankind form three of the fundamental principles of the Baha'i religion. The oneness of humankind is the pivot round which all other teachings of the Baha'i religion revolve. The realization of this essential oneness and creating consciousness about it are the goals of the Baha'i religion. Its social teachings include the equality of men and women, the eradication of all prejudices, and the elimination of extreme poverty and wealth. There are no clerics in the Baha'i religion, and the affairs of the community are run by the elected bodies at local, national and international levels. The world population of Baha'is is estimated to be around five million,<sup>9</sup> approximately 300,000 of whom live in Iran.

## An Overview of the History of the Persecution of Baha'is in Iran

With the spread of the Baha'i religion in Iran since its tumultuous birth in that country in the middle part of the nineteenth century, the persecution of its followers has been a part of Iranian history. As historian Amanat (2008) indicates, during the Qajar period (1785-1925), anti-Babi pogroms and campaigns usually occurred during provincial or national crises such as those caused by harvest failures, famines, and epidemics. The Babis (and later Baha'is) served as scapegoats to cover the state's failure in relation to European economic and political intrusion. Drawing the attention of the public to the evils of this so-called devious sect served to consolidate relations between the Qajar government and the clergy.

With the demise of the Qajars, and the rise of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-1941) to power, physical assaults, including murder, against Baha'is considerably decreased but did not cease. The last mob attack on Baha'is during this period occurred in 1926, when angry groups killed somewhere between eight to twelve Baha'is in Jahrum, a small city in the Fars province. The attacks were apparently instigated by a representative of parliament who sought to gain favor with anti-Baha'i religious leaders in order to secure re-election. The Baha'is complained to the local and national authorities to no avail (Yazdani, 2011). Although Baha'is enjoyed reprieve from physical attacks during the rest of Reza Shah's "iron-fist" rule,<sup>10</sup> they were deprived of certain social rights in the closing years of his reign when the government forbade Baha'i meetings, closed Baha'i centers and Baha'i schools, and harassed Baha'is on matters concerning census forms, marriage certificates, and birth certificates. The government also dismissed some Baha'i government employees and stripped several Baha'is serving in the army of their ranks (Yazdani, 2011). The motivation behind such harsh measures might lie in Reza Shah's determination "to subordinate all other loyalties to allegiance to his person" (Martin, 1984, p.20), or perhaps in his intention to avoid unnecessary friction with the Shi'i clerics, that is, friction beyond what was inevitable for the implementation of what were called his "modernizing" ideas.

With Reza Shah's forced abdication and Mohammad Reza Shah's accession to the throne in 1941, the influence of the Shi'i clerics resurged, and a new era commenced. The situation of Baha'is during Mohammad Reza Shah's reign (1941-1979) went through different phases, despite the official narrative of the current Islamic regime, which depicts this period as one of bliss and prosperity because of Baha'i "collaboration" with the Shah's regime. To make a long story short, while the Shah himself did not have an anti-Baha'i stance, his treatment of Baha'is was the net result of his intricate relations with the Shi'i clerics on the one hand, and his concern with creating a favorable international image regarding human rights on the other. From 1941 through 1955, during the periods of socio-political crises, Baha'is were initially scapegoated in the interactions among the government, the clerics, and the people, and went through several bloody incidents, the culmination of which was the 1955 anti-Baha'i campaign (Yazdani, 2016). During this campaign, the government of the Shah initially gave the Shi'i clerics free reign to persecute the Baha'is, but later, fearing further deterioration of its reputation and human rights record, attempted to inhibit further attacks by clerics on Baha'is, and refused to accept their official request to purge Iran of all Baha'is (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2008).<sup>11</sup> From the late 1950s to the last years of the Shah's reign, Baha'is enjoyed relative security, even if they were officially non-existent in the country (Fischer, 1980; Yazdani, 2016).

In the latter half of the turbulent year of 1978, the Shah's regime destabilized, and religiously motivated physical threats and mob attacks on Baha'is—which had ceased for about two decades—resurfaced in different parts of Iran, particularly in some rural areas where Baha'is were expelled from their villages (Fischer, 1980; *The Baha'i World*, 1986, pp. 271-74). In 1978, seven Baha'is were killed in different parts of Iran, mostly as a result of mob violence (Baha'i International Community [BIC], 2008a, Appendix A).<sup>12</sup> Such events, which continued for months after the February 1979 victory of the Islamic Revolution, were alarming signals to Baha'is of difficult times ahead.

The leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, let it be known from the beginning that Baha'is were not to be tolerated in his regime (Yazdani, 2012). In the first three years of the Islamic Republic, one hundred Baha'is were executed (BIC, 2008a, Appendix D). Many more were arrested and jailed with long sentences, and community properties were confiscated. All Baha'i government employees were dismissed from their jobs, and Baha'i students were expelled from universities. In some cases, for a limited period of time, school-aged Baha'is were dismissed from elementary, middle and high schools.<sup>13</sup> In 1983, the government officially outlawed all the institutions of the Baha'i Administrative Order, basically composed of Assemblies of nine members elected by the vote of the believers at the local and national levels.<sup>14</sup> In obedience to the law of the government, as the Baha'i teachings dictate, the Baha'i community closed all the local Spiritual Assemblies functioning at the level of the cities, and the National Spiritual Assembly. Over time, the harsh initial attacks of the 1980s gave way, in the 1990s, to steady pressure of a cultural and economic nature intended to strangle the Baha'i community and force Baha'is to convert to Islam.<sup>15</sup> These changes were memorialized by a secret 1991 memorandum signed by the Supreme Leader, which will be discussed below.

Arrests, imprisonments, and hate-mongering against Baha'is has only increased since the presidency of Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013).<sup>16</sup> In 2008, the seven members of the *ad hoc* committee overseeing the affairs of the Baha'is of Iran were imprisoned. Each received a twenty-year sentence, which was recently reduced to ten years, according, reportedly, to the lawyers of the defendants. Many others have been incarcerated for varying durations, the allegations usually being national security-related charges. This pattern has not changed during the presidency of Hasan Rouhani (2013- ).

### **Why the Persecutions?**

The short answer to this question is that most Shi'i clerics in Iran consider the Baha'i religion heretical and feel threatened by it. Mainstream Islamic reading of a verse from the Qur'an (33:40)<sup>17</sup> makes Muslims believe in the finality of Muhammad's prophethood. Therefore, the majority of Muslim clerics consider a religion appearing after Islam a mere heresy which must be uprooted. Most of them also feel threatened by it because it attracted a large following early in the nineteenth century, and its social teachings and fundamental tenets, such as the oneness of humankind and the equality of men and women, make it attractive to many today. Its lack of an ecclesiastical order and rejection of clerics as an unnecessary category is particularly unsettling to the Shi'i clerics.

Even though the history of anti-Baha'ism in Iran in all its aspects is yet to be studied academically, in recent decades, historians of Iran have made some valuable contributions. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi (2008) from the University of Toronto has shed light on the link between Islamism and anti-Baha'ism, and Yale historian Abbas Amanat (2008) has investigated the roots of anti-Baha'ism in Iran. Dismissing theories of class conflict as inadequate for explaining the pattern of anti-Baha'i violence, Amanat interprets their persecutions as a "socio-cultural phenomenon." The Baha'is, he argues, "were a sore point of non-conformity within a society seeking monolithic unanimity in the face of overwhelming threats from within and outside of its boundaries; a society fearful of losing its perceived 'uniqueness' as the Shi'i 'saved sect.'" The anti-Baha'i sentiments were, in Amanat's analysis, "a doctrinally admissible ritual to forge a sense of collective 'self' versus an indigenous 'other' at a time when the alien 'other' was too intimidating and inaccessible to be viewed as an adversary." The rejection of "the indigenous modernity of the Babi-Baha'i world view and its advocacy of universalist inclusion" was the corollary to "Shi'i particularism," a term Amanat uses to refer to the sense of "exclusive self" that Iranian Shi'ism aims to construct "out of the fragile complex of the existing religious and social identities" (pp. 180-181).

Harvard historian Roy Mottahedeh (2008) has also developed a general theory explaining the

treatment of Baha'is under different regimes before the Islamic Republic. Situating the conditions of Baha'is in the interplay between the clerics and the state in modern Iranian history, Mottahedeh suggests that in Iran,

the Baha'is throughout most of their history were a pawn that...governments played in their complex game with the mullahs...[N]one of the governments was willing to surrender this pawn in a single move ...Tolerating Baha'is was a way of showing mullahs who was boss. Correspondingly, allowing active persecution of the Baha'is was the low-cost pawn that could be sacrificed to the mullahs when the government was in trouble or in special need of mulla support. (pp. 238-239)

Houchang Chehabi (2008), professor of International Relations and History at Boston University, in investigating the roots of secular anti-Baha'ism in Iran, proposes that Baha'i cosmopolitanism deeply rooted in the tenets of their religion causes anti-Baha'i prejudices in many secular Iranians, mostly nationalists with xenophobic tendencies. Reza Afshari (2008), Professor of History and Human Rights at Pace University, focuses on anti-Baha'ism under the Islamic Republic. Proposing that political considerations and state expediencies alone do not fully explain the anti-Baha'i policies and actions in the Islamic Republic of Iran, as Baha'is did not present a challenge to the consolidation of the Islamic regime, Afshari suggests that such actions originated "in the clerics' aversions, whose roots lay in a pre-modern religious prejudice" and "their dislike of a home-grown religious faith." He also demonstrates that in post-revolutionary Iran, whenever the political factions have vied with one another for power, the persecution of Baha'is has increased (p. 238).

In diagnosing the political conditions of our time, the Italian political philosopher, Giorgio Agamben (b. 1942) petitions the notion of *Homo Sacer* and draws upon two distinct notions of life available to the ancient Greeks: *zoé*, something that is alive and not dead, and *bios*, life as taking a particular Form, e.g., the life of "a European carpenter or of a Persian king" (Ugilt, 2014, p.39). *Homo Sacer* is a juridical term found by Agamben in archaic Roman law referring to someone who "may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (Agamben 1998, p. 8). The idea of *Homo Sacer*, or bare life, Agamben says, is still with us. It refers to a life that is completely bare, a life lived as pure *zoé*. Human beings today still can be reduced to *homines sacri* (Ugilt, 2014, p.39-40). In this sense, *Homo Sacer* is a person excluded from society, having no rights or functions in society.

Using Agamben's conceptualization, it can be said that for the Islamic Republic, Baha'is as the followers of a post-Islamic religion (hence, considered inherently "heretical,") fall into the category of *Homo Sacer*, forcibly reduced to the state of bare life (*zoé*), outside the country's legitimate social life (*bios* or *political life*). According to Agamben, the device the state uses to reduce people to bare-life is the "state of exception." The 1979 Revolution created the perfect "state of exception" for the new regime to reduce Baha'is to bare life and exclude them from the nation's *bios*. Consequently, Baha'is were killed, exploited, and denied their rights in the years that immediately followed the Islamic revolution. Similarly, the "Cultural Revolution" that followed the political revolution was another "state of exception" during which Baha'is were denied access to higher education, a situation that, in effect, continues to this day.

While it is true, as we saw in Amanat's analysis for the Qajar era, and Yazdani's for the Pahlavi era, that ever since the inception of the new religion in Iran in the nineteenth century, almost all the crises in the country, be it natural disasters (such as periods of famine during the Qajar period), or socio-political crises (such as the economic difficulties and other post-1953 coup d'état problems in 1955), were perceived as "states of exception" in which looting, raiding and killing the bare life, the excluded, the outsider, and the Other could be committed with indemnity, it was the establishment of the Islamic Republic that intensified and consolidated this pattern. The Shi'i theocracy that was established in Iran after the 1979 Revolution officially, blatantly, and more strictly than before limited the arena of legitimate social life, *bios*, to the followers of the four religions of Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, and radically excluded Baha'is from this arena, reducing them to the state of bare life, *Homo Sacer*, who could even be killed with no

punishment for the murderer.

With this background on the history of anti-Baha'i activities in Iran, the remainder of this paper will focus on the particular case under study, the Islamic government's prohibition of Baha'is from entering universities in Iran, and its attempts at preventing BIHE from functioning.

### **“Their Progress and Development” Must be “Blocked”**

For more than twenty years following the dismissal of all Baha'i students from universities, Baha'is high school graduates were not permitted to take part in the nation-wide university entrance exam. The application form had a question on religion, where applicants had to choose one of the four officially recognized religions of the country: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. Since Baha'is did not identify themselves with any of the four, they would not choose any of the options, the majority rather adding a note in the “explanations” section that they were Baha'is. As a result, they would not be sent the card needed to enter the examination hall. The international repercussions of the Iranian government's prohibiting Baha'i students from entering universities—with governments, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations and individuals raising questions about this situation—finally led the authorities to devise strategies that would generally keep Baha'i students out of universities, while pretending to the world that Baha'is were not being discriminated against. To understand what follows, it must be explained here that the university admission process has three major stages: 1) applying for the nation-wide entrance exam; 2) applying for specific universities based on the result of the exam, the transcript of which they have received; and 3) enrolling in the particular program providing admittance. Over the years, various ploys have been put into place to exclude Baha'is at each of these stages, and even after the actual enrollment during their studies.

In 2005, Husayn Mehrpour, the advisor to Mohammad Khatami, the reform-minded president of Iran from 1997 to 2005, and the head of the committee responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Constitution, published a collection of communications from the office of the president pertaining to the “difficult duty” of the committee he headed. Some of these communications are about Baha'is and their complaints to both Iranian authorities and international societies. A couple of the communications were related to BIHE, one of them to the complaints of Baha'is regarding the major 1998 raid on this institution (see below). Mehrpour attracts the President's attention to the issue, and the latter refers the case to the Supreme Council of the National Security and orders rapid investigation (pp. 601-602,636). It can be inferred, from the communications, that at least some of the authorities of Khatami's administration had concerns about the plight of the Baha'i students, but to little avail. Nonetheless, it was perhaps as a result of such communications that a change happened in 2004-2005, the last year of the Khatami presidency.

In 2004, the National Education Measurement and Evaluation Organization issued new application forms with a change that sounded promising: The question of religious identity was replaced by one asking on which religion the applicant wanted to be examined. The Baha'is gladly filled out the forms and took the entrance exam for the first time in years. However, when they received their transcripts, they saw that on the top of the page it was mentioned: “Religion: Islam.” Astonished and disappointed, they decided that moving on to the next step of applying for the programs and universities of their preference, based on their score, would practically mean admitting the false religious identity indicated on the exam results. In other words, they had to accept identification as Muslims in order to enter university (BIC, 2004a; BIC 2004b). Interestingly, near the end of the application deadline, some Baha'is who had received their transcripts were contacted by the authorities asking why they had not applied. The authorities quickly resolved the problem by printing new exam results without noting a religious affiliation. Once the final results were announced, however, only eight out of hundreds were accepted, and all to the school of languages. The eight decided not to begin their studies to demonstrate solidarity

with the near thousand that were denied. Later, Morteza Nourbakhsh, the person within the National Education Measurement and Evaluation Organization responsible for the “Moral Selection” of the applicants, confided to some Baha’i youth that this supposed resolution stemmed from the presence of six UNESCO judges visiting Tehran to investigate international complaints regarding the educational persecution of the Baha’is. The whole process of contacting a number of Baha’is asking them why they had not applied was to make the UNESCO judges believe Baha’is were allowed to enter Iranian universities.<sup>18</sup> Faced with the question of why religious affiliation remained on transcripts, the Iranian government’s representatives stated before the international community that the reference to religion on the forms was not about the religion of the applicant, but the religion on which they wished to be examined. In 2006, despite a degree of skepticism, in a gesture of goodwill, and with the hope of finally finding a solution to a problem that had besmirched the name of Iran, Baha’is accepted the explanation posed by the Iranian government, and went on with interpreting the incorporation of “Religion: Islam” on the university entrance exam results as their choice of religious studies, not religious identity (The Universal House of Justice, 2007). Around a thousand students applied for universities and while the majority were denied acceptance on the pretext that their files were “incomplete,” fewer than two hundred entered universities. Later that year, however, Asghar Zarei, the head of the central security office of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, in a confidential letter, instructed the administrators of 81 institutions of higher education all over Iran, to dismiss any student as soon as she or he is identified as a Baha’i (BIC, 2007). This was proof that the claims made by the Iranian government’s representative before the international community were completely false (The Universal House of Justice, 2011). Almost two-thirds—128 out of the approximately 200— of the Baha’i students who had entered universities in the autumn of 2006 were gradually expelled during the 2006-2007 academic year (BIC, 2007). When the Baha’i International Community’s representative to the United Nations brought up this information, a spokesman for Iran’s mission to the United Nations said the information was “baseless” and charges were wrong, adding, “No one in Iran has been expelled from studying because of their religion” (Nicholos, 2007). An even more blatant claim unraveled the instrumental use of allowing occasional Bahai students to be present in universities in Iran. Following the press release issued in late March 2006 by Ms. Asma Jahangir, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights’ Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, about the government’s call for the Baha’is in Iran to be secretly monitored (BIC, 2006), Iranian diplomats responded by claiming Baha’is not being prevented from higher education as a testimony to their not being persecuted.

In 2007, the Education Evaluation Organization, declared as “incomplete”—and therefore invalid—the applications of some 800 Baha’is who took the national exam for university entrance for the academic year 2007–2008 (The Universal House of Justice, 2007). The situation since then has continued. A proportionately small number of Baha’i applicants are accepted only to be expelled later on—whether in the first semester or the last—as soon as their Baha’i identity is brought up. Students usually discover that they have been dismissed when they attempt to log into their accounts at the university and find a message stating that their account has been blocked due to “a security problem” and will be referred to the security office for further “legal” steps. It is only when students follow up that they are orally told that they have been dismissed because they are Baha’is. In some cases, students have been told that they will not be given a document specifying the cause of their dismissal because such a document “would be used in Zionist circles” against the government.<sup>19</sup> In rare cases where a written letter is provided, the cause of dismissal is intentionally left in vague, non-specific terms such as lacking the “general qualifications” required,<sup>20</sup> or even just “due to some reasons,”<sup>21</sup> or due to “legal obstacles.”<sup>22</sup> Iranian authorities

are quite careful not to provide Baha'is with documents that might confirm the actual reason for their exclusion from higher education, which would thereby contradict the claims of Iranian representatives. To bypass the hassles of covering up dismissals, the preference of the authorities is not to admit Baha'is in the first place. The majority of the Baha'i applicants are refused entrance, simply on account that their files are "incomplete" (BIC, 2008b; BIC 2008c). In 2014, as a new tactic to conceal the fact that the Iranian government prevents Baha'is from entering universities, the applicants were told to go the local testing office for their results. There, they were shown but not physically given papers that say only Muslims and "officially recognized minorities" were allowed to be accepted into university (BIC, 2014).

Baha'is have done their best to accommodate the requirements of application. For example, in recent years, the "general conditions" required, among other things, "Belief in Islam, or one the religions indicated in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism)," "lack of enmity toward the authority of the Islamic Republic of Iran," and a prohibition on propagating the "fake religions" (Saziman-i sanjish-i amuzish-i kishvar, 2014). Obviously, the religious conditions were set there in order to exclude Baha'is, or to force them to recant their religion if they want to get accepted. The Baha'i community, however, interpreted the "belief in Islam" as not necessarily tantamount to being a Muslim. After all, they thought, as Baha'is they do believe in the truth of Islam and other religions. Therefore, they found no contradiction between their being Baha'is and meeting this condition. Furthermore, they thought their religion is not "fake," and therefore, the other prohibiting item does not apply to them either. The "Guide to the Enrollment and Participation in the Nation-wide University Entrance Exam," for 2016 has now been published by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. It has all the above conditions<sup>23</sup> and includes the "important notifications" that further require that "whenever it is clarified that the applicant has hidden some facts, or lacks some of the conditions indicated in this notebook, they will be deprived [from education] be it at any stage in the enrollment process or actual education in the university" (p. 14). This specific requirement confirms the 2006 instructions issued by the head of the central security office of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology ordering the dismissal of students identified as Baha'is. The basis for those instructions is a far more significant—and likewise confidential—memorandum.

The confidential memorandum, dated 25 February 1991 (corresponding to 6 Isfand 1369, in Iranian calendar), was approved by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and written by Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani, then secretary of Iran's Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution. It was disclosed in 1993 by Reynaldo Galindo Pohl (d. 2012), the Salvadoran jurist who was at the time serving as the U.N. Human Rights Commission's special representative on Iran (Ahmari, 2012).<sup>24</sup> Addressing "the Baha'i question," the memorandum expatiated upon the policy of the Islamic Republic to, using the words of the international body governing the affairs of the Baha'i community, "eradicate the Baha'i community as a viable entity" (The Universal House of Justice, 2011). The memorandum followed and disclosed the larger plan of the Iranian government to push Baha'is to convert to Islam, through closing doors of any social progress to them, so that if they do not convert, they end up being an illiterate, uneducated and poor community. In the memorandum's "summary of the results of the discussions and recommendation," under the subtitle "A. General status of the Baha'is within the country's system," item number three stated, "The government's dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked." Under the subtitle, "B. Educational and cultural status," item number three stated, "They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Baha'is." One

item under the subtitle, “C. Legal and social status,” indicates, “to the extent that it does not encourage them to be Baha’is, it is permissible to provide them with the means for ordinary living in accordance with the general rights given to every Iranian citizen, such as ration booklets, passports, burial certificates, work permits, etc.”<sup>25</sup> Even though the memorandum was issued in 1991, as far as the deprivation from higher education is concerned, it basically just articulated a policy that had practically been in place since re-opening of the universities after the “Cultural Revolution” in the early 1980s. In other respects, however, the memorandum reflected a shift from overt persecution, such as killing, to covert, steady, long-term economic and social strangulation, a policy that had in fact begun in the mid- to late-1980s. In effect, it summed up what the government had been doing to that point and provided a blueprint for the future treatment of Baha’is. The duplicitous stance of the Iranian government since 2005 *vis-à-vis* the question of Baha’is and higher education is simply the application of the recommendations of the memorandum approved by Ayatollah Khamenei, and further emphasized, in 2005, by the confidential letter of Zarei, the head of the central security office of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. The handful of Baha’i students who have been allowed to continue and finish their studies seems to have been kept for the Iranian government to be able to claim, in the face of the international community, that Baha’is are not discriminated against, and are, in fact, studying at the universities.

### **The Baha’i Institute for Higher Education**

The harsh attacks on the Baha’i community, particularly the imprisonments and executions, gradually decreased to some degree<sup>26</sup> after the first few years, even though discrimination, deprivation of most of the social rights, and economic pressure continued with the original intensity.<sup>27</sup> There were several reasons for this change, including the fact that the persecution, particularly the executions, attracted the attention of the people of the world and practically led to results untoward for the Islamic Republic—more recognition of the Baha’i religion, on the one hand, and negative reputation for the revolutionary government, on the other. The relative, though temporary, decrease in imprisonments and executions in the late 1980s provided the Baha’i community with a respite to consider the worrisome prospect of its youth being excluded from universities in their own country—a deprivation that, in terms of its long-term consequences, could be regarded as the worst among persecutions, given the Baha’i religion’s emphasis on education. To make up for this lack, in 1987, a number of the dismissed Baha’i university lecturers managed to create an informal network of higher education with a curriculum and selection process similar to prestigious universities, despite the limited resources in their disposal. The institute thus created—“The Scientific Program,” as it was then called—provided much hope and motivation for Baha’i youth in high schools. In a country where the main incentive for doing well in high school comes from the prospect of entering a university, these youth had a difficult time keeping their motivations high prior to the establishment of this higher education program, knowing all too well that they would not be given a chance even to take the university entrance exam, let alone begin their studies. With BIHE, despite their total awareness that it could not provide them with a degree officially recognized inside Iran, they had hope for higher education. By the mid-1990s, the informal educational network had turned into a more extensive program and was called the Baha’i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). Teaching was primarily by correspondence, with small classes in private homes (BIC, 2005; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2006). Those teaching at BIHE were professors dismissed from Iranian universities and various other physicians, dentists, lawyers and engineers. The majority of those teaching at this informal network of learning were graduates of Iranian universities, while others had graduated from Western universities, some quite prestigious (BIC, 2005).<sup>28</sup>

Everyone involved worked on a voluntary basis, and no Baha'i was actually paid in connection with services rendered to BIHE (BIC, 2005). Education continues to be primarily through correspondence courses, with occasional in-class meetings at the homes of the students or professors. Practical considerations and security issues have led to more courses being offered online. Over the course of the past decade, BIHE has also been assisted by a large number of volunteer professors from around the world who form its Affiliated Global Faculty (AGF). Despite the simplicity and lack of facilities, BIHE achieved such a high academic standard that some graduates of BIHE have been accepted at dozens of university graduate programs outside Iran (BIC, 2005). Following their graduate degrees, the majority of BIHE students selflessly choose to return to Iran and teach at BIHE (The Universal House of Justice, 2011).

### **The Government's Reaction to BIHE**

The Iranian government, which was closely observing the activities of the Baha'is, soon became aware of the formation of a network of learning inside the Baha'i community, and showed no particular opposition during the first few years.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps it assumed that the whole process would ultimately be nothing more than something to keep both groups, the professors and the youth, busy, with no actual results. What would an institute for higher education be like, after all, if the government does not recognize it? This assumption, if actually the case, proved false. While BIHE was not officially recognized inside Iran, a number its graduates managed to gain admittance to universities in North America for graduate studies. Carleton University in Canada was the first university to accept the graduates of BIHE into its Master's programs. Soon, other Western Universities followed suit. The recognition of BIHE outside Iran, and by prestigious universities in particular, was perhaps the reason why Iranian authorities changed their attitude towards the institute. BIHE had proved, by its recognition abroad, that it could provide students with a real and quality education, which the Iranian government did not want them to have (see below). Between 29 September and 3 October 1998, during centrally orchestrated, well-coordinated attacks, government officials operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Information, an intelligence agency of the Iranian Government, raided the houses of the main BIHE lecturers and many of its students in Tehran and outlying provinces. They arrested thirty-six faculty members and staff. They also confiscated all school equipment, including books, photocopiers, fax machines, and computers, that pertained to the study in BIHE in more than five hundred homes (BIC, 2005).<sup>30</sup> The raid and arrests were, to some degree, unexpected by BIHE students, professors, and administrators,<sup>31</sup> but they were determined to continue. The attack and arrests brought BIHE and its plight to the attention of academics outside Iran. Some institutions of higher education expressed their protest against the crack-down on BIHE.<sup>32</sup> The incident also had repercussions in major news outlets outside Iran.<sup>33</sup> Those who had been arrested were asked, while in custody, to sign a document declaring that BIHE had ceased to exist and that they would no longer cooperate with it. They refused to sign any such declaration (BIC, 2005). The detainees were released after some time. The faculty, administrators and the students were all determined to continue the pursuit of knowledge, against all odds. In 2001 and 2002, the government took other actions against the operations of BIHE (BIC, 2011a). Later, there was again a centrally orchestrated series of raids carried out on the homes of some of the faculty members and administrators on 22-24 May 2011. Again, in a coordinated campaign, the agents of the Ministry of Information raided as many as thirty houses in Tehran, and many other cities, arrested some fourteen of the faculty members and administrators of BIHE, and confiscated high-tech gear and books. Some of those arrested were released within a couple of weeks (Mobasherat & Sterling, 2011; Ahmari, 2012; BIC, 2014 a). The rest were put on trial, accused of "conspiracy against national security" and "conspiracy against the Islamic Republic of Iran" (BIC, 2011b), and sentenced to two to five years of imprisonment. Today, a number of them have been released after finishing the terms of their sentences, while others remain in jail.

## The Response of the Baha'i Community

For Baha'is, continuing the education of their youth is a matter of faith: Universal education is one of the fundamental tenets of their religion. The gravity of exclusion from higher education for Baha'is, therefore, goes beyond its long-term socio-economic consequences. The Baha'i insistence on higher education must be seen, and the sacrifice of those teaching voluntarily at the risk of losing their freedom must be understood in this context.

As mentioned earlier, the Baha'i community, as a matter of principle, is adamant about obeying the law of the land. While they accepted the closure of the institutions of the Baha'i Administrative order in 1983, following the government pronouncing them as unlawful, when it came to the government's attempt to close BIHE under the same pretext, Baha'is considered the efforts to educate their youth a right that could not be taken away. After the 2011 crackdown on BIHE, and the government's attempt to declare it illegal, the official Baha'i stance was that learning could not be outlawed; or to put it more formally, since BIHE did not issue any official diplomas, portraying it as illegal was absurd. Connecting the existence of BIHE to the government's prohibiting Baha'is from attending universities, the international body heading the world-wide Baha'i community wrote:

It is as though one were to deny certain citizens access to available food supplies and when they undertake with untold hardship to cultivate their backyards in order to survive, declare their efforts illegal and destroy their crop. Persistence in these dehumanizing acts serves only to expose the irrational determination of the authorities to block the social progress of the Baha'is. (The Universal House of Justice, 2011)

From the days of harsh persecutions in the early days of the new regime in 1979, as had been the case before, the Baha'i response to oppression has been first and foremost to appeal to the relevant Iranian authorities. It was only when such appeals went unanswered that Baha'is all over the world started appealing to international organizations. In recent years, the Baha'i community has tried to raise the consciousness of the people of the world, particularly academics, about the plight of the Baha'i youth in Iran and the challenges they face in fulfilling their most natural need as humans, the need to know.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

Denying Baha'is access to higher education, while outwardly claiming to do otherwise, is the course of action the Islamic Republic has pursued in order to resolve its identity dilemma: the conundrum of being an ideologically-founded government or a modern state required to fulfil its duty to ensure the well-being and progress of all its citizens—the dilemma of religious versus national identity. In response to this situation, the Baha'i community, in addition to resorting to legal means to gain the right for its youth to enter universities, created its own network of learning, the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, a collective effort that reflected the importance of education, and the value of selfless service for the members of this community.

The intention of the government of the Islamic Republic is to exclude Baha'is from higher education, as evidenced in the confidential 1991 memorandum of the secretary of Iran's Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, approved by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, stating unambiguously that their development must be blocked. Dismissing all Baha'i students from universities during the Cultural Revolution in the early 1980s, and subsequently prohibiting them from taking the prestigious nation-wide university entrance exam for twenty-five years, are two strategies the ideologically-driven government has contented itself with pursuing. Believing Baha'is to be heretics, a government that identifies itself first and foremost with Shi'ism has had

no problem depriving Baha'is of their most fundamental human rights. It has sought to deprive them of any means that could lead to their upward social mobility and influence. Continuing complaints from Baha'is both inside and outside the country led to international concern. In response, the Islamic Republic revised its policy without inhibiting its fundamental goal to weaken the Baha'i community as much as possible. Since 2004, a portion of the Baha'i students have been allowed to take the entrance exam, a small percentage of those applying for the universities have been admitted, while the majority have been rejected under the premise that their files are "incomplete". From the small number of students who have been accepted, the majority has been expelled at some point in their studies. Only a handful have been allowed to graduate.

Given the importance of education for Baha'is, in 1987, the dismissed university professors resolved to establish an intra-community network of learning, which, even though not recognized by the government, could provide the youth with both motivation and opportunity for education. Over time, this institute for higher education, although not recognized inside the country, managed to educate graduates that could enter universities outside Iran to continue their studies. This success caused the government to crack down on BIHE, confiscating its instructional tools and arresting its faculty and staff. Tolerating long prison sentences, those running BIHE did not succumb to the government's absurd wish to close this main venue of higher education for its youth.

Perhaps the dilemma the Islamic Republic of Iran faces—doing what its very narrow reading of "correct" religiosity dictates, while saying that it operates in a way that the world expects a modern government to operate—is a compelling argument for the institutional separation of religion and state in the contemporary world. The plight of the Baha'i community of Iran, including its youth and their quest for a fundamental and basic human right, the right to learn and to acquire knowledge, in turn, can be regarded as representative of the persecution of the followers of all new religions in world history.

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<sup>2</sup> Shiraz medical school was one of the first to re-open. It took some three years for most of the other universities to resume their activities.

<sup>3</sup> Although there are no exact statistics of the number of Baha'i university students at the time, based on the author's interviews with a number of individuals directly involved with the Baha'i university students' affairs in Iran in 1979, the estimate is close to one thousand.

<sup>4</sup> The only exceptions I know of were a few higher-level medical students who had finished their pre-clinical period and were about to graduate. They were allowed to finish their studies.

<sup>5</sup> Other academic studies on BIHE include Karlberg (2010) that discusses BIHE as a prime example of Iranian Baha'i community's constructive and non-adversarial response to oppression; Affolter (2007) that documents the organization and delivery of higher education services through BIHE, from inception up to 2007); Ghadirian (2008); Clarken (2009).

<sup>6</sup> I am building this idea on Mehdi Khalaji's suggestions in this regard, expressed in "Baha'iyān dar Iran: tahsil va tanafur," *Voice of America, Ofogh* (2015, March 9). Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gN4\\_6kZSpVk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gN4_6kZSpVk) (accessed 5 Jan. 2015)

<sup>7</sup> For more on the Baha'i religion, see Smith (2008); Momen (1999); Hatcher & Martin (1985).

<sup>8</sup> The followers of the Bab who was executed in 1850 were known as Babis. For an academic study of the Bab and his early followers, see Amanat (1989). The majority, more than 90%, of Babis became Baha'is, i.e., the followers of Baha'u'llah.

<sup>9</sup> Estimates range from five to seven million.

<sup>10</sup> For Reza Shah's rule, see Abrahamian (1982), pp.102-165.

<sup>11</sup> Tavakoli-Targhi asserts that the occasion was at the same time the apogee of the collaboration between the Shah's regime and the Shi'i clerics, and the point of separation between them.

<sup>12</sup> An earlier source had recorded that ten Baha'is were killed in 1978 (*The Baha'i World*, 1986, 291).

<sup>13</sup> The author has witnessed such events while living in Shiraz, Iran at the time.

<sup>14</sup> On the Baha'i Administrative Order, see Smith, 2000, pp. 24-28; Hatcher & Martin, 1985, pp. 143-165.

<sup>15</sup> On the situation of Baha'is under the Islamic Republic, see Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2006; Momen, 2005; Affolter 2005; Kazemzadeh 2000; Cooper 1985; Nash, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> On hate-mongering against Baha'is in Iran, in this period, see BIC, 2011b.

<sup>17</sup> The verse has been translated as, "Muhammad is not the father of any man among you; rather, he is the Messenger of God and the Seal of Prophets. And God is knower of all things." See Nasr, Dagli, Dakaka, Lumbard & Rustam, 2015, 1031-32.

<sup>18</sup> E-mail communication with individuals in Tehran involved in the process. The identity of these individuals is kept confidential for safety concerns.

<sup>19</sup> Information obtained from individuals who have gone through the process and are currently living in Iran. Their identities have been kept confidential for their safety.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the letter informing Delaram Sadeqzadeh, the distinguished student of the Master's program in Educational Psychology of Shahid Beheshti University, dated 28 April 2015, informing her of her dismissal, available at <http://www.radiozamaneh.com/249985> (accessed 5 Jan., 2016).

<sup>21</sup> An example is the letter dated 22 September 2010, written by Mohammad Mohsen Taghvi, the Director of Education of the Medical Sciences University of Rafsanjan to Ja'fari Naveh, the deputy education administrator of the university's Medical School, regarding the expulsion of the recently admitted medical student Rouhollah Ghudrat. A soft copy of the letter is in possession of this author.

<sup>22</sup> See a letter regarding the dismissal of an English Language student in May 2007, from the University of Gilan, can be retrieved from <http://aasoo.org/documents/19/> (accessed 5 Jan., 2016).

<sup>23</sup> It is "notebook number one," of the 2016 edition, and the "general conditions" appear on page 4.

<sup>24</sup> Galindo Pohl served in this position from 1986 to 1994. He also served as education minister and president of El Salvador's National Constitutional Assembly, a member of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and later as his country's ambassador to the United Nations (Ahmari, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> For both the original Persian memorandum and its English translation, see Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2006, Appendix 7. For the translation, see also BIC, n.d. The Islamic Republic's goal for the destruction of the Baha'i community goes beyond the borders of the country. Item number six of this confidential memo, under "educational and cultural status" indicates, "A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country."

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<sup>26</sup> Of the more than 200 Baha'is killed after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the majority, 184, were executed between 1979 and 1984; 19 between 1985 and 1987, three in 1988, two in 1992, three in 1997, and one in 1998. One person died while in custody under suspicious circumstances in 2005 (BIC, 2008a, Appendix I). Despite the fact that no Baha'i has been officially sentenced to death after 1998, several Baha'is have been murdered under suspicious circumstances without any government investigations, in recent years (BIC, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> According to the Baha'i International Community (2010), "since 2005, there has been a resurgence of more extreme forms of persecution, with increasing arrests, harassment, violence, and arson attacks on Baha'i homes and businesses."

<sup>28</sup> Those who had studied abroad had degrees from universities in the West, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Columbia University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the Sorbonne (BIC, 2005, p.23).

<sup>29</sup> It must be mentioned here in some cities, like Mashhad, the first country-wide entrance exam which was administrated in the houses of Baha'is was interrupted by the government's Information Office, but BIHE was allowed to resume its work.

<sup>30</sup> For an account of a Western traveler to Iran who interviewed two of BIHE lecturers on their experience of teaching at that institute and of the 29 September 1998 raid, see Sciolino, 2000, pp. 226-230.

<sup>31</sup> Prior to this first round of raids in 1998, the agents of the Information Office had attacked the office of BIHE only once, taken all the archives, and returned them after some time. This author's personal interview with one of the administrators of BIHE.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), 1999.

<sup>33</sup> For example, Bronner, 1998; Bollag, 1998.

<sup>34</sup> In recent years three major campaigns have been launched in North America for creating awareness in this regard primarily among academics. The first was a series of screenings of the documentary, "Education under Fire," and discussions following it, in 2011 (Amnesty International, 2011). See <http://www.educationunderfire.com/> (accessed 5 Jan. 2016). The second was a similar campaign called "Education Is Not a Crime," during which a documentary on BIHE, titled, "To Light a Candle" made by the renowned Iranian journalist, Maziar Bahari, was screened followed by discussions, in several universities and cultural centers around North America. The third one, #NOTACRIME, uses street art and social media to push the cause of human rights in Iran, particularly the deprivation of Bahais from higher education into the public imagination ([www.notacrime.me](http://www.notacrime.me)).