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# Iranian Bahais in the U. S. Fear Persecution in Their Homeland

Since the revolution a year ago, Iranian Bahais in the United States have had to face the possibility of never again seeing their homeland. They allege that Bahais there face widespread persecution.

"I know it would be dangerous to return," said a 26-year-old graduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles who preferred anonymity, as do many Iranian Bahais in this country. "I would be very much interested in going back to Iran because there is a great deal of activity in the Bahai community, but under this regime it is impossible."

The dangers to which the student referred were discussed in a recent report by the Federation of Protestant Churches in Switzerland. The report included charges of confiscation of Bahai companies and savings institutions, appropriation of Bahai cemeteries and arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of Bahais, the largest religious minority in Iran.

Unlike Christians or Jews in Iran, the Bahai faith, a religious outgrowth of Shiite Islam founded in Persia in the mid-19th century, is not accorded freedom of religion under the Islamic Constitution adopted in December.

### Sacred Shrine Destroyed

On Sept. 8 of last year the most sacred shrine of the Bahais, the House of the Bab in the center of Shiraz, was attacked and destroyed. Bahais in Iran and the United States have charged that members of Iran's revolutionary guard participated in the attack.

In response to protests by Bahai assemblies in the United States, the Iranian Embassy in Washington disavowed Government involvement in the shrine's destruction. An unsigned letter embossed with the seal of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran said that a crowd of mourners attacked the shrine because they were provoked by the knowledge that Bahais had worked for the Government of the deposed Shah.

"Unable to control this grief the crowds suddenly attacked the Bab's House. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran had nothing to do with this action," said the letter, which was sent to Bahai assemblies in the United States.

"We would like to point out," the letter continued, "that the Bahais in Iran are in fact a political group; therefore they are not recognized as a religious minority."

### Communities in U.S. Have Grown

Communities of Iranian Bahais in Houston, Los Angeles, Berkeley and New York have grown following the ascent of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power, according to Victor deAraujo, the Bahai representative to the United Nations. The Bahai International Community, the worldwide title of the Bahai faith, is accredited as a nongovernmental organization to several United Nations' agencies and has representatives at the United Nations in New York and Geneva.

Mr. deAraujo said there are about 10,000 Iranian Bahais in the United States, and 6,000 to 7,000 of them came during the past year.

Most Bahais from Iran are reluctant to discuss their experiences or those of their relatives under the revolutionary Islamic regime because they fear retribution by

Islamic authorities against the Bahai community. "If you hear apprehension in our voices and reluctance to state our case you will understand why," said Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, a professor of Russian history at Yale University and one of the few Iranian Bahais willing to speak openly. "We have to protect a community of 400,000 people in Iran. There is nobody who is going to defend the Bahais."

Among the principal tenets of the Bahai faith is the belief in the spiritual unity of mankind. The Bahais believe that Mirza Husayn, known as Bahauallah, is the messenger of God as he declared in 1863.

### Persecution Charged

The Bahai faith claims 100,000 believers in the United States. In 1898 the first Bahai center in America was established in Freeport, L.I.

In an effort to assess the situation of the Bahais in Iran, the Zurich-based Human Rights Commission of the Federation of Protestant Churches compiled a confidential report detailing "specific areas of harassment and even persecution against the Bahais in Iran."

Among the findings of the commission was evidence that "groups of unidentified gunmen systematically attacked some 20 centers of the Bahai community in various districts of Teheran," "revolutionary militiamen" disrupted spiritual meetings and religious classes and Bahai religious teachers were arrested and interrogated.

The commission also charged that the assets of two Bahai companies, Sherkat Omana, a holding company for Bahai properties, including holy places, cemeteries, historical sites, administrative centers and welfare institutions and Sherkat Nownahallan, a bank from which many Iranian Bahais drew support for their education in the United States, "had been officially confiscated by the direct order of the National Iranian Islamic Public Prosecutor's Office."

### Money Problems for Many

For many Bahais in this country the confiscation of Sherkat Nownahallan's assets has created financial problems and has made it difficult for some to make tuition payments at American colleges and universities.

Iranian Bahais on student visas have been subject to the general review of their status, along with other Iranian students, by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

"The Jews and Bahais have notified our field offices of their special situation," said Verne Jervis, a spokesman for the Naturalization Service. "They, along with anyone else who may feel persecution, can apply for asylum." By Dec. 28 there had been 484 requests for asylum, some of which were based on fear of religious persecution, he said.

Some Iranian Bahais plan to return to Iran. "I feel I need to go back to Iran," said a business student at Berkeley. "Because others are in trouble we shouldn't run away. My wife and I know people whose houses have been burned down. We used to have meetings of 500 people in Teheran but we have to be more careful. Now we have to have meetings of 20. There is a great deal of tension; everybody is worried about the future."