

Iran's Baha'is: Some Call It Genocide

By R. W. APPLE Jr.

LONDON — For centuries the city of Shiraz, in southwestern Iran, has been a center of Persian poetry and intellectual life. The very word "Persian" comes from Pars, the name of the region centering on Shiraz. It is also the birthplace of the Bab, a 19th-century prophet whose teachings led to the creation of the Baha'i faith.

Two weeks ago in that city, the latest chapter in a long history of the Baha'i persecution unfolded before an Islamic tribunal. Of 21 members of the sect on trial for spying and alleged links with Israel, 20 were condemned to death, according to a Baha'i spokesman in London. The remaining defendant was pardoned.

The Baha'is have been the scapegoats of Persian and then Iranian society for generations. Donald M. Barrett, the secretary-general of the Baha'i World Center in Haifa, Israel, says 20,000 Baha'is have been killed in Iran during the last 100 years. Since the advent of the Khomeini regime in 1979 at least 135 Baha'is, many of them spiritual leaders, have been executed.

The adherents of this relatively little-known religion seem unlikely villains. They uphold the divine origin of all major religions, including Islam. They shun violence, abstain from partisan politics and advocate unexceptionable principles such as the "development of good character" and the "eradication of prejudices of race, creed, class, nationality and sex," to quote from a recent pamphlet. Claiming adherents in 173 countries, the Baha'i faith published literature in some 600 languages and dialects. It maintains vast domed houses of worship in Wilmette, Ill.; Frankfurt-am-Main, West Germany; Kampala, Uganda; Sydney, Australia and Panama City, Panama. Others are being built in India and Samoa.

In Iran, however, members of the sect have always been considered heretics by the Shi'ite Muslim majority, while their relative prosperity has attracted the hostility of those less well-off. There are between 300,000 and 400,000 Baha'is in Iran, according to officials of the faith. Mr. Barrett estimated that 10,000 have left the country since the revolution. For the last six months, he added, none have been able to leave. Applications for exit visas must now specify the applicant's religion, and Baha'is are being turned down.

Although Savak, the secret police of the late Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, is believed to have persecuted some members of the sect, and despite the Shah's refusal to reopen Baha'i schools closed by his father in 1934, the Baha'is served the old regime under their doctrine of obedience to the temporal authorities of the country of residence. Indeed, the Shah was so certain of their loyalty, he used Baha'is to maintain army communications. That led the Khomeini regime — especially the mullahs, who resent the Baha'i challenge to their authority — to accuse the sect of collaborating with a corrupt government.

"That is absolutely false," Mr. Barrett said. "Baha'is are forbidden from participating in partisan politics. Baha'is were the only group who, at great risk, refused to join the Shah's political

party. We were nonpolitical and continue to be nonpolitical."

Nonetheless, officials in Teheran see the sect as a classic example of the impurity of the Shah's Iran. They further believe that Baha'is are in league with an Iranian enemy, Israel, citing as evidence receipts from contributions made by Iranian Baha'is to shrines at Haifa and at Acco in Israel. In fact, Israel is the Baha'i holy land.

Religious differences heighten Iran's contempt for the sect. Because Baha'is do not make distinctions between men and women, they do not segregate the sexes at religious services, as demanded by Iran's Islamic fundamentalists. Baha'i women wear no veils, having cast them aside in the last century. Baha'is are accused of immorality because their marriage rites are not recognized in Iran and no civil marriage exists. A member of the sect commented, "We can betray our faith and marry according to Moslem precepts, or we can remain true to our beliefs and find ourselves accused of adultery, prostitution and other sins."

Meanwhile, Baha'is are being denied recognition under the Islamic constitution, which in theory protects Iran's Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian minorities. This has permitted what the Baha'i office at the United Nations called a "campaign of religious persecution so malevolent, so intense, so sustained and so far-reaching that it presages the eradication of the Baha'i community as a religious minority in Iran."

It appears now that about three years ago the Khomeini Government initiated a program to break the sect's organizational back. The faith has no priests or mullahs and hence no ecclesiastic hierarchy; it is run by councils or assemblies elected by secret ballot each year. On Aug. 21, 1980, all nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly in Teheran were arrested. Nothing has been heard of them. Since then, Mr. Barrett said, members of local spiritual assemblies in every locality have been picked up. Exact numbers are not known, but it seems that thousands have been jailed or abducted.

Businesses have been confiscated, trade licenses revoked; retired government employees have lost pensions. Houses, crops and animals have been destroyed; shrines and cemeteries demolished; children have been denied places in schools. The house of the Bab in Shiraz — which means as much to Baha'is as the Church of the Nativity means to Christians, the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem means to Jews and the Kaaba shrine in Mecca means to Muslims — was bulldozed, Mr. Barrett said. The site is now a parking lot.

Condemnations by the European Community, the United States and the United Nations have "slowed the process of total obliteration of the Baha'i faith in Iran," according to Mr. Barrett. But other Baha'i leaders and several independent observers use the word "genocide" to describe what they fear is happening.

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