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The Case of the Bahá'í Minority in Iran

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Douglas Martin reviews the history of the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran and the success the community has had in using the U.N. system in their defense. This article first appeared in the 1992-93 edition of *The Bahá'í World*, pp. 247-271.

The experience of the Bahá'ís of Iran is a classic case of the violation of human rights, produced by religious intolerance. Prior to the Islamic revolution a deep-seated prejudice against the Bahá'ís and their religion characterized not only Iran's Islamic clergy and the illiterate masses, but also many among the country's educated elite and middle class. The prejudice was widespread and communicated itself to many Western observers. Michael Fischer, a generally sympathetic commentator on the revolution notes, for example, that even the exercise of routine civil functions by Bahá'ís was seen as proof of a "Bahá'í conspiracy".¹ Richard W. Cottam, author of *Nationalism in Iran*, pointed out the problem of even discussing the subject of the Bahá'í Faith in a country in which the word "Bábí" has long been freely used as an epithet, along with such words as "infidel", to describe anyone to whom the speaker is strongly opposed.² This prejudice is probably the most important point to grasp for an observer wishing to understand the situation of the Bahá'ís in modern Iran.

The second point is that, in the land of the Bahá'í Faith's origin, the prejudice is, paradoxically, combined with an almost universal ignorance of the religion's nature, teachings, and history. For over a century a curtain of silence has surrounded the subject. The Bahá'í community has consistently been denied the use of any means of communication with the general public: radio, television, newspapers, films, the distribution of literature, or public lectures. The academic community in Iran has studiously ignored the existence of the worldwide Faith founded there; the subject has never been treated in any university courses or textbooks. Indeed, census figures which provided statistics on all of the other religious and ethnic minorities in Iran have consistently been omitted for the Bahá'í community, the largest religious minority of all.³ Coupled with this calculated general neglect, the public mind has been subjected, for decades, to abusive propaganda from the Shi'ih Muslim clergy, in which the role of the Bahá'í community in Iran, its size, its beliefs, and its objectives have been grossly misrepresented.

Both the ignorance and the prejudice are connected with the tragic events that surrounded the beginning of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths in nineteenth-century Persia. It may help in clarifying the events of the past decade if this background is briefly reviewed.

Historical Background

The Bahá'í Faith came into existence through the teachings of two successive Founders. The first, a young Persian merchant known to history as the Báb, announced in Shíráz, in May 1844, that He was the bearer of a Revelation from God, whom the Shi'ih branch of Islám had long expected under the title "the Twelfth Imám".⁴ The world stood, He said, on the threshold of an era that would witness the restructuring of all aspects of life. The challenge to humanity was to embrace these changes by undertaking a transformation of its moral and spiritual character. Central to the Báb's teaching was the announcement of the imminent appearance of yet a second Divine Messenger, one who would address all the peoples of the world.⁵ During the course of widespread attacks on His followers, incited by the Muslim clergy, the Báb was executed in the city of Tabríz, in 1850. There followed throughout Persia a horrific series of massacres of followers of the new religion. These pogroms aroused the revulsion of Western diplomats and scholars, and deeply scarred the Persian psyche, inspiring an effort to justify the killing of thousands of innocent

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people by excoriating the victims' beliefs and intentions.

In 1863, however, one of the Báb's leading disciples, who had survived the pogroms, a Persian nobleman, Bahá'u'lláh, announced that He was the Messenger for whom the Báb had come to prepare the way. Partly because of the force of His own person and teaching, and partly because of unusual marks of distinction conferred upon Him by the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh quickly attracted the allegiance of virtually all the Bábís. From exile in the neighboring Ottoman Empire, He began a thirty-year mission which brought into existence the worldwide religion and community that today bear His name and that are distinct from the Bábí religion out of which the Bahá'í Faith emerged.⁶ Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are contained in a vast body of writings, in both Persian and Arabic, regarded by Bahá'ís as the source of authority in their Faith.



Members of the Iranian army participating in the destruction of the National Bahá'í Center, Teheran, Iran, May 1955.

At the heart of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings is the concept of the oneness of mankind: "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens".⁷ Strong emphasis is placed on the abolition of prejudices of all kinds, on full equality between men and women, and on the responsibility of each individual to investigate truth for himself. The great religious systems of humanity are seen as equally valid stages in the progressive revelation of the Divine Will, a process that will continue as long as the world endures. Bahá'ís are encouraged to apply the scientific principle to the study of all reality, including spiritual issues. Although forbidden by their beliefs to involve themselves in any form of partisan political activity, members of the Faith are urged to give all possible support to developments that conduce to global unification.⁸ Some of Bahá'u'lláh's most important writings call upon the rulers of the world to create an "International Tribunal" to which nations will surrender whatever degree of sovereignty is necessary for the establishment of world peace and disarmament.

There is hardly a tenet of this credo that is not in conflict with some dogma promulgated by the clerics of Shi'ih Islám, the dominant religion of Iran. Muslim opposition was sharpened by Bahá'u'lláh's insistence that humanity has entered the age of its maturity, in which neither clergy nor rituals are any longer required. The central principle of the age, He says, is the process of consultation and group decision-making, the key to well-being for both the individual and society. To the clerics of Shi'ih Islám it seemed certain that the promotion of such ideas in Iran would bring to an end the system of tithes, endowments, social precedence, and political power which they have always regarded as their religious right. To religious bigotry was early added, therefore, the force of personal investment in the prevailing scheme of things.

Outside the Muslim world, however, the new religion began to attract a growing body of adherents. Communities sprang up across North America and Western Europe, as well as in India, and lands in the East and Far East. While Bahá'u'lláh's teachings forbid proselytism as an infringement on the spiritual integrity of the individual, great encouragement is given to activities that promote public awareness of the Faith and that attract new members. Large scale enrollments began in the 1950s and 60s, particularly in Latin America and Africa. Today, the worldwide Bahá'í community numbers over five million members, representative of virtually all of the world's racial, religious, and cultural diversity. National administrative structures have been erected in 165 countries⁹ on a foundation of over 25,000 locally elected councils or "Spiritual Assemblies". Beginning in 1963, acting on provisions laid down in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, the membership of the National Assemblies have elected regularly at five-year intervals the Faith's international governing body, the Universal House of Justice.¹⁰

As a consequence of this expansion, Iranian Bahá'ís now represent considerably less than ten percent of the world's total Bahá'í population. It is this highly diverse global community that sees itself as the target of an entirely unjustified attack on its members in the land of the Faith's birth.

The Pahlavi Period, 1925-1979

With the rise of the Pahlavi Shahs in 1925, a number of important developments occurred in Iran which were to have major repercussions on the welfare of the country's Bahá'í community. Central to these developments was the policy which Reza Shah and later his son, Muhammad Reza Shah, adopted toward the Muslim clergy. Their objective was to transform their country, then known in the West by its historic name Persia, into a modern secular state. In pursuing this goal Iran's new rulers sought to exclude the clergy from all major areas of social and cultural influence, while continuing to pay lip-service to Shí'ih Islám as the country's state religion and to provide funding for religious institutions. The tensions which this policy engendered were managed by the regime's alternating suppression and appeasement of Islamic interests.

Since the Bahá'í minority represented a major pool of educated people, they had, of necessity, been employed in the many branches of the civil service, while continuing to be denied formal constitutional rights. The intensity of clerical opposition to the "Bahá'í heresy", however, made of the issue an irresistible means of placating the mullahs. Repeatedly, during the rule of both of the Pahlavi Shahs, eminent mullahs were allowed to incite mob attacks on Bahá'í holy places and other properties. The ensuing loss of life, however, inevitably attracted foreign protest. In 1955, a particularly flagrant involvement of the government in one of the pogroms resulted in interventions at the United Nations.¹¹ The Shah was embarrassed when international pressure forced him to curtail the worst of the excesses.

The Islamic Revolution

The collapse of the Pahlavi regime in February 1979 appeared to free the Shí'ih clergy from the restraints which international considerations had forced the Shahs to place on their political and social influence. After ecclesiastical pressure had led also to the overthrow of two interim revolutionary administrations,¹² the mullahs assumed the civil power they today exercise as cabinet ministers, justices of the Supreme Court, members of Parliament, heads of government departments, revolutionary judges, military commissars, and block wardens whose control extends to the details of daily life. Even the offices of President and Prime Minister were eventually filled by clergy. The media became organs of religious propaganda. Ration cards and other crucial permits were distributed at mosques. New legislation imposed rigid rules from the Islamic Sharia, the code of laws based on Islamic tradition, on day-to-day life, and used the courts and police to enforce these ordinances.

This theocratic regime confirmed the status of non-Muslims as second-class citizens. Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians were admitted to certain limited civil rights as "protected minorities" but were denied equality under the law with the Muslim majority. For the Bahá'í community, however, there was not even this protection. As early as December 1978, shortly before his return to Teheran, the Ayatollah Khomeini had made it clear that, in Islamic Iran, Bahá'í citizens would have no rights whatever.¹³ While the Islamic Constitution, adopted in 1979, makes a general reference to the enjoyment of "equal rights" by all citizens, clauses assign the enjoyment of such civil rights to persons who belonged either to the state religion or to one of the tolerated minority faiths specifically named: Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism.

Persecution Intensifies

Encouraged by this formal exclusion of Bahá'ís from the protections of citizenship, fanatical elements in the society began a full-scale assault on the community. Prominent Shi'ih clergymen launched attacks on Bahá'ís from the pulpit and in the media, denouncing them as "enemies of Islám", "corrupt on earth", and persons "whose blood deserves to be shed". The effect was to unleash waves of violence. Members of the Faith were beaten, many businesses were confiscated or destroyed, hundreds of houses burned, and efforts began with a view to forcing Bahá'ís to recant their faith. By early 1980 this campaign had begun to enlist key organs of the government. Bahá'ís were hunted out and discharged from all forms of government employment. Prominent members of the community were dragged before revolutionary tribunals and, in June of 1980, after summary mock trials, a series of executions began.¹⁴

With the assumption of full power by the mullahs that same month, horrors multiplied daily: Bahá'í girls kidnapped from their families and raped, the bodies of highly-respected Bahá'ís dragged through the streets, cemeteries bulldozed, their tombstones auctioned, widows forced to pay the price of the bullets which had been used to execute their husbands, and appalling tortures practiced on prisoners in the unending attempt to force the Bahá'ís to recant their faith.



The background of these outrages was a daily life in which Iranian Bahá'ís had become social outcasts with no recourse against whatever abuse the ill-disposed chose to commit. Bahá'í marriages, regardless of duration, were declared null and void, Bahá'í marital life was deemed prostitution (itself punishable by death), and Bahá'í children were judged illegitimate. A "Law of Retaliation" exempted crimes against Bahá'ís from any punishment under the law. Bahá'í holy places were seized and publicly desecrated, Bahá'í children were expelled from schools throughout Iran, and retired Bahá'ís were summoned to repay not only the pensions to which they had contributed during government service but also the salaries that had been paid to them during their years of employment.¹⁵

The House of the Báb in Shiraz, one of the holiest shrines in the Bahá'í world, was demolished by Iranian authorities soon after the Islamic revolution in 1979. Its destruction stands as an ominous symbol of the Iranian Government's attempts to destroy the Bahá'í community of Iran.

International Protest

Initially, during the Bazargan ministry, the first of the two revolutionary regimes which replaced Muhammad Reza Shah, the Iranian Bahá'í community limited its protests to representations to the new government. Efforts were made to overcome the prevailing prejudice against the Bahá'í community and to reassure the government that Iranian Bahá'ís were loyal citizens of their country.

When these initiatives received no response from the civil authorities, Bahá'í communities around the world sought the intervention of their own governments in the hope that quiet representations might induce Iran to halt at least the worst of the abuses. The governments of Australia, Canada, and of several European nations were particularly supportive. The hostage crisis which began in the fall of 1979, sharply limited the role the United States could play in these initiatives.

By the time the Bazargan ministry fell, in November 1979, however, it was apparent that such efforts were meeting with very limited success. As violence increased, Bahá'í communities began to intensify efforts to bring the situation to the attention of the world's

media. Supporting documents exposed the growing implication of Iranian government officials in the persecutions, as well as the absence of any evidence for the charges on which Bahá'ís were being condemned by revolutionary tribunals. Newspaper stories and radio news reports on the subject began to appear in a great many Western countries.¹⁶ Television networks soon took up the case, several of them doing feature stories.

As attention given to the situation by the media increased, foreign protest became open. As early as September 1979 the Human Rights Commission of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Switzerland undertook an independent investigation which led it to denounce the treatment of the Iranian Bahá'ís as a clear example of a campaign of religious persecution. On 16 July 1980, the Canadian Parliament passed a unanimous resolution urging that the United Nations Commission on Human Rights should intervene. Two months later, on 19 September the European Parliament went on record as describing the attacks on Iran's Bahá'ís as "a systematic campaign of persecution", and urged member nations of the European community to bring pressure to bear on the Iranian regime to halt the abuses.

With political turmoil in Iran increasing, the accusations which were being made against the victims underwent a shift. For decades, the clerical leadership and their agents had focused on the dangers that "false religion" posed to the integrity of Islám and the purity of Islamic life. The growth of radical political rhetoric now led the mullahs to emphasize a second theme: the Bahá'í community was said to have been a clandestine ally of the Pahlavi regime and to have benefited from this alleged behind-the-scenes support. In the absence of any evidence for such accusations, the Muslim clergy argued that, under even the old Constitution, the Bahá'ís should have had no civil rights; the limited freedom they had to exercise civil functions, therefore, was proof that they had enjoyed a "privileged position". Significantly, these quasi-political charges were soon included in the efforts of Iranian embassies overseas to respond to press criticism of the persecution.¹⁷

Abstention from Violence

Meanwhile, the government itself was becoming the target of violent opposition. It became apparent that the religious leadership was bent on establishing a theocratic regime in which its own members would hold all of the positions of power. Its political allies, particularly those on the left, considered this a betrayal of the trust they had placed in the Ayatollah Khomeini and the sacrifices they had made for the revolution. Their reaction was to launch a campaign to overthrow those whose rise they had assisted. Since all of the principal organs of the State were in the hands of the mullahs, the opposition turned to political assassination. Hundreds of members of the new regime and several thousand of the revolutionary guards who supported them were killed by bombs, bullets, knives, and dynamite in a campaign of terrorism which quickly turned government offices into virtual prison-fortresses.¹⁸

The Bahá'í community remained entirely aloof from these controversies. Among the principles strongly emphasized by Bahá'u'lláh are obedience to government and the avoidance of involvement in partisan political activity of any kind. Although not pacifists in the more technical sense of the term, Bahá'ís are guided by Bahá'u'lláh's injunction that "it is better to be killed than to kill".¹⁹ It is significant that, despite the extreme hostility of the regime to Bahá'ís, and the superstitions which had been carefully cultivated with respect to them, no suggestion has ever been made in any quarter that the community was implicated in assassinations or other terrorist acts.

The reason was the historical record that the community had established. While the early Bábís had believed they had the right to take up arms in self-defense against religious persecution, Bahá'u'lláh had called on Bahá'ís to refrain from armed resistance against attacks. Successive outbreaks of persecution during both the Qajar and Pahlavi periods had been met by appeals for the intervention of the civil authorities and, increasingly, of the international community. When the Islamic revolution occurred, therefore, although

members of the community were regarded with superstitious fear and suspicion by the general population, they were also seen as non-violent.

Viewed superficially, this record of non-involvement in partisan politics or civil violence had only seemed to weaken the position of Iran's Bahá'ís. In the words of Hamid Algar, a contemporary Shi'ih scholar whose writings reflect an attitude generally hostile to Bahá'ís, the minority group: ...came to occupy something of a position between the State and the Ulama (mullahs), not one enabling them to balance the two sides, but rather exposing them to blows which each side aimed at the other. The government, interested in maintaining order, would resist the persecution of the Bahá'ís by the Ulama, but would equally, when occasion demanded, permit action against the Bahá'ís.²⁰

When the crisis provoked by the new Islamic revolutionary regime arose, however, the historical record which the Iranian Bahá'í community had scrupulously established for over a century was to prove a key element in the successful international campaign for its defense.

Appeal to the United Nations

As it became increasingly apparent that leading circles in the new regime were bent on the destruction of the Bahá'í community, and that other means of deflecting the campaign had failed, the Bahá'í International Community²¹ turned to the United Nations. The appeal began in September 1980, and coincided with representations from a number of other sources about a range of alleged human rights violations in Iran. The work of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights is assisted by a sub-commission which deals with a range of concerns at the preliminary level. Responding to the representations of the Bahá'í International Community, the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities adopted a resolution addressing the Bahá'í concern and asked the Iranian authorities to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of this religious minority. There was no response from the Iranian government to this appeal.

The following year, with the encouragement of certain governments, including those of the European Community, Bahá'í representatives expressed their concerns to the 37th Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, which met in Geneva from 2 February to 13 March 1981. Later that same year a number of governments raised the matter of the human rights situation in Iran, specifically the persecution of the Bahá'ís, at the 36th Session of the United Nations General Assembly itself.

Within Iran the persecution intensified. Accordingly, the Bahá'í International Community now made a direct appeal to the Commission on Human Rights. On 24 February 1982, the Commission had before it the report of the Secretary-General containing many serious allegations about human rights abuses in Iran, including the treatment of the Bahá'ís. The request for the submission of this information came from the Sub-Commission's resolution adopted at its 34th seminar, August/September 1981. In the face of determined efforts by the Iranian representatives, who argued that the report was motivated only by the desire of what they termed "United States imperialism and her European criminal friends" to interfere with the Iranian revolution, the Commission reviewed the Bahá'í submission. The latter included reproductions of official documents in which virtually every department of the Islamic Republic's government referred to the adherence of the victims to "the depraved Bahá'í religion" as its sole and sufficient reason for seizing property, discharging employees, revoking pensions, expelling schoolchildren, confiscating bank accounts, prohibiting business dealings, and passing death sentences. Copies of articles from major Iranian newspapers were provided, in which the details of the condemnations had been openly celebrated.

Following this presentation the Commission adopted a resolution, 5 March 1982: the Secretary-General was directed to begin an investigation of the human rights situation in Iran, and the Iranian government was asked to cooperate.²²

The Iranian Response

The discussions at the Commission on Human Rights had begun to reveal a certain unease among Third World nations with respect to Iran's human rights record. Some of these had earlier spoken out at Geneva and had expressed solidarity with the revolution. Pressure from such smaller and disadvantaged countries, however, had an equal potentiality to become a serious embarrassment to Iran's revolutionary government. Atrocities against law-abiding citizens could not be justified even on those grounds of necessity which might be advanced to explain efforts to protect the revolution from its political opponents.

An interesting feature of the debate at the 1982 Commission on Human Rights, therefore, was the development by representatives of the Iranian government of a new rationale for its treatment of the Bahá'í minority. The argument was to become the foundation for the regime's attempts to counter all criticism of its attitude toward its Bahá'í citizens.

For many years Bahá'ís had been identified by fundamentalist Iranian Muslims as among the elements in Iranian society which were "Westernizing" the country. The charge owed its origin to the popular tendency in fundamentalist circles to regard such principles of social development as the equality of men and women, reliance on democratic decision-making processes, and freedom in scientific investigation as "satanic" influences originating in Western lands. Such ideals were widely associated with the beliefs of the Bahá'í minority.

This prejudice was seized upon and elaborated into a conspiracy theory in which Iran's Bahá'ís were pictured as secret agents serving foreign governments. Foreign control of the community had much earlier been attributed to Tsarist Russia. Subsequently it passed, in a manner never explained, to the British Foreign Office. Now, however, the Bahá'í Faith was transformed, again through a process not revealed by those making the allegations, into an extension of "international zionism." At the meeting of the U.N. General Assembly's Third Committee, in November 1982, Iran's Permanent Mission distributed copies of a booklet entitled *Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, in which these political accusations against the Bahá'í minority were explained in detail.

With international attention growing, the Iranian authorities also undertook elaborate efforts to conceal the continuing executions of prominent Bahá'ís. Between 30 December 1981 and 9 January 1982, however, *Le Monde* carried a series of stories exposing the secret executions of the members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'í community in Iran. The stories eventually forced the Chief Justice of Iran, Ayatollah Moussavi-Ardibili into an embarrassing public retreat from earlier denials.²³

The Bahá'í Faith Formally Banned

Initially, it appeared that the intervention of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights would have no more effect on the situation of Iran's Bahá'ís than had that of individual governments. Persecutions continued and, in some local cases, became particularly flagrant. On the night of 18 June 1983 the Islamic revolutionary authorities in Shíráz hanged ten Bahá'í women and teenage girls who had refused to recant their Faith and convert to Islám. Three days earlier the same authorities had hanged six men, including the husbands, fathers, and sons of four of the women. The Islamic judge who presided at the trials, Hujjatu'l-Islám Qazá'i, was quoted in the government-controlled newspaper *Khabar-i-Junub* as warning that, if Bahá'ís did not recant their Faith, "the day will soon come when the Islamic Nation will...God willing fulfill the prayer of Noah: 'Lord leave not one single family of infidels upon the earth'..."²⁴

In August of that year, Iran's Prosecutor-General announced the formal banning of all Bahá'í religious institutions in the country, and declared membership in them and service to them to be criminal offences. In accordance with the Bahá'í principle of obedience to

government, the Iranian community immediately complied, dissolving both its National Spiritual Assembly and all of its local Assemblies throughout the country. In an open letter to the government, some two thousand copies of which were audaciously distributed by hand to the ministries, the press, and other public agencies, the community announced its complete submission, protested the treatment accorded to their Faith, and called on the government to fulfill the promise made by the Prosecutor-General that Bahá'ís would at least be permitted, as individuals, to practice their religion in the privacy of their own homes.²⁵

The worthlessness of this promise was quickly demonstrated when a new wave of Bahá'í arrests followed immediately on the heels of the ban. The majority of the victims were people who had formerly been members of the now dissolved institutions. It was clear that the authorities were making use of the ban as a legal device to sweep up large numbers of prominent Bahá'ís and charge them, retroactively, with crimes against the State.

The United Nations Appoints a Special Representative

The Iranian government may have been counting on the case eventually losing momentum in the United Nations system, simply because of the difficulties and complexity of maintaining international concern. If so, it was disappointed. At the meeting of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in 1984, a new resolution was adopted calling on the Chairman to appoint a Special Representative to undertake a thorough study of the human rights situation in Iran, including that of the Bahá'ís. Subsequently, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) endorsed the Commission's decision. The report of the Special Representative, Mr. Andres Aguilar, expressed great concern at the number and gravity of the reported human rights violations in Iran. In endorsing these observations, the Commission extended the Representative's mandate and requested him to present an interim report to the General Assembly at its 40th Session, including in its resolution "the situation of minority groups such as the Bahá'ís." Again, the Economic and Social Council endorsed the decision.²⁶

In consequence of these initiatives the General Assembly of the United Nations itself went on record, in Resolution 40/141, as expressing "its deep concern over the specific and detailed allegations of violations of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," outlining in its statement some of the specific reported violations. The General Assembly decided "to continue its examination of the situation," by taking up the matter at its 41st Session, with the assistance of further reports submitted by the Special Representative of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

By 1986 Mr. Aguilar had submitted his resignation. The Commission on Human Rights appointed Mr. Reynaldo Galindo Pohl to serve as the new Special Representative of the Commission, and had called on the Iranian government to extend its cooperation in his investigation by inviting him to visit Iran. For two years the Iranian government resisted this pressure to cooperate, insisting that the mission represented improper influence exerted on the Commission by various Western governments. With the assistance of one or two other delegations, Iran was able to secure the introduction at successive sessions of the Human Rights Commission, of procedural motions which would have had the effect of sidetracking the case and freeing Iran from accountability. All of these efforts failed, however, and the Human Rights Commission continued to renew the mandate of the Special Representative and to press Iran on the issue.

By this time, political developments in Iran and the country's deteriorating economic condition produced a change in strategy on the part of the Iranian authorities. In 1988 it was announced that Iran would accept the visit of Mr. Galindo Pohl and lend its assistance to his investigation. After further delays the visit of the Special Representative took place from 21 to 29 January 1990.

The First Visit by the UN's Special Representative

The change in Iranian strategy included a number of steps to reduce some of those abuses of Iranian Bahá'ís which had attracted particular international protest. Beginning a year prior to the Galindo Pohl visit, the government began a systematic release of Bahá'ís from the prisons and jails where over 700 of them had been confined. While some new arrests would be made from time to time, the general effect was to reduce sharply the number of Bahá'í prisoners. At the same time, most Bahá'í parents were permitted to re-enroll their children in the school system without having to comply with regulations which had earlier made such re-admission dependent on the child's recantation of his Faith. Again, the new policy was hedged about with significant limitations: university students, for example, were not included in the permission.

Executions, which had aroused particularly sharp criticism in the international media and had been the object of vehement condemnation by foreign governments, came to a halt. The last two Bahá'í victims in Iran prior to the first visit of the Special Representative were Iraj Afshin and Bihnam Pashá, both executed in 1988.

In commenting on the situation in various public statements, the Bahá'í International Community acknowledged the improvements that had taken place in the situations of various of its members in Iran. The Community pointed out, however, that these improvements did not affect the status of the Bahá'í community in general, nor did they include any form of religious tolerance. The Bahá'í Faith remained a proscribed religion, its shrines and other properties confiscated, its members denied any right to practice their Faith, and the community excluded from all constitutional rights and protections.

The report submitted by Mr. Galindo Pohl after his visit, while candidly acknowledging the continued disabilities and abuses experienced by Iranian Bahá'ís, expressed the hope that the situation in Iran might be moving toward a kind of general "tolerance" of the community. This view was presumably based on statements made to the Special Representative by Iranian authorities, since only one Bahá'í witness was able eventually, and with enormous difficulty, to gain access to the building where the hearings were taking place.²⁷

The Representative's Second Visit

Encouraged by the willingness of the Iranian government to permit the Representative's visit to take place at all, and by a number of human rights improvements which Mr. Galindo Pohl felt he had observed, the group of nations which had taken the lead in framing the succession of resolutions over the past several years likewise adopted a change of strategy. After behind-the-scenes negotiation with the Iranian delegation, the Western group drafted a relatively mildly worded resolution, renewing the Galindo Pohl mandate and inviting Iran to continue its cooperative stance by welcoming a second visit by the Special Representative. The resolution was carried unanimously, the Iranian delegation having indicated before the vote that it would not oppose adoption. The willingness of the Iranian delegation to give tacit consent to direct investigation of the situation, even where the Bahá'í concerns were specifically singled out for mention, marked an important turning point.²⁸

The second visit occurred 9 to 15 October 1990. The subsequent report was, however, considerably more critical of the human rights situation in Iran than the first, concluding that "The enormous quantity and variety of allegations and complaints received from very diverse sources, even allowing for the fact that they may contain errors or exaggerations, provide a credible factual basis for the belief that human rights violations occur frequently..." For this reason, the report urged continued "international monitoring by the competent United Nations organs, with a view to insuring compliance with international human rights instruments in the Islamic Republic of Iran..." With respect to the situation of the Bahá'í minority, the Special Representative said: "Many documents signed by administrative authorities have been received, providing evidence of discrimination, confiscation, rejection by universities, suspension of pensions, demands for the return of

pensions earned and paid, denial of passports and other irregularities ...This keeps the Bahá'ís in a perpetual state of uncertainty about their activities. The Government should therefore be requested to take effective action to ensure that these Iranian citizens enjoy the same civil and political rights as the rest of the population."²⁹

Despite this rather somber evaluation, the delegations which had sponsored the previous year's resolution on Iran appear to have concluded that the consensus strategy still offered the greatest promise of maintaining pressure on the Iranian government and encouraging an amelioration of the human rights situation in the country. Accordingly, after considerable negotiation, they set aside their own proposed text of a new resolution, in favor of a compromise draft prepared in the name of the Commission's chairman.³⁰ This resolution, which again passed without a vote, continued the mandate of the Special Representative to investigate the "allegations of human rights violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran" and once again called upon the government of Iran "to comply with international instruments of human rights." Significantly, this consensus text continued to single out "the situation of the Bahá'ís" for particular attention, a clear signal to Iran of the seriousness with which a large number of delegations continue to view the Bahá'í issue.

The Representative's Third Visit

When the Commission again took up the human rights situation in Iran, in February 1992, this pressure markedly increased. The new interim report submitted by the Special Representative after his third visit in December 1991 was still more severe in its criticism of Iran, including its references to the Bahá'í case, and much more explicit in endorsing the evidence for the charges being made by the Bahá'í International Community.³¹ While noting that there had apparently been no further executions of Bahá'ís and that the number of arrests had significantly fallen, the Special Representative reported that "harassment and discrimination" had persisted. He concluded that "the documentation gathered is reliable evidence of unfair and discriminatory treatment toward Bahá'ís", and made specific reference to property confiscations, denial of university education, refusal of permits to establish businesses, confiscation of cemeteries and places of worship, discrimination in matters of employment, access to public services, etc. The Commission's attention was particularly drawn to "harassment...aimed at forcing them [Bahá'ís] to recant their faith."

Against this background, the 48th session of the Commission received from a group of eighteen nations the text of a draft resolution much firmer than those of the preceding two years, noting the Special Representative's view that "no tangible progress occurred in the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding the better implementation of human rights," expressing its concern about certain specific problems, including "discriminatory treatment of certain groups of citizens for reasons of their religious beliefs, notably the Bahá'ís," and endorsing the view of the Special Representative that "the international monitoring of the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran should be continued." Several other delegations associated themselves with the draft after it had been tabled.

In the face of a Commission climate which was increasingly favoring the adoption of consensus resolutions, Iran rather unwisely pressed the matter to a vote. The resulting Resolution, which reproduced precisely the text of the draft, was carried by twenty-two votes to twelve, with fifteen abstentions.³² The mandate of the Special Representative was extended for a further year, and he was asked to present an interim report to the General Assembly at its forthcoming 47th session. Consideration of the situation in Iran would be maintained "as a matter of priority" at the following year's Commission session.

On 18 March 1992, for the first time since 1988, a Bahá'í prisoner was executed. Three months later another Bahá'í was murdered by members of Iran's Disciplinary Forces, and in September 1992, two more death sentences were passed. On 27 August 1992, the 44th session of the Sub-Commission of Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities passed a resolution drawing attention to the renewed persecution of religious

minorities and summary killings of Bahá'ís.³³

On 23 November 1992, the Special Representative's report to the United Nations General Assembly was released and, in relation to the Bahá'ís, was the strongest one to date. On 18 December 1992, the United Nations General Assembly passed a strong resolution (88 votes in favor to 16 against, with 38 abstentions) making special reference to the treatment of the Bahá'í community and expressing regret that "the Islamic Republic of Iran has not given adequate follow-up to many of the recommendations contained in the previous reports."³⁴ The examination of the human rights situation in Iran would continue during the General Assembly's 48th session in 1993.

Mr. Galindo Pohl's annual report to the Commission on Human Rights in February 1993 revealed the existence of a circular, issued on 25 February 1991 by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and signed by President Khamenei, outlining the government's unpublicized policy towards the Bahá'í community. According to the Special Representative, the "guidelines have some slightly positive elements, in particular when they refer to the general status of this group and the granting of work permits, ration books and passports. But it must be observed that one rule limits all the others, namely, that which provides that the progress and development of the Bahá'ís shall be blocked."³⁵ While the intention to oppress the Bahá'í community is clear, the contrast with the regime's earlier practices is dramatic. That those actions against the Bahá'ís which embarrassed the government in international fora would have to be curbed was made clear in the statement made by Ayatollah Khamenei, spiritual leader of the regime, as quoted in the preamble of the document: "in this regard, a specific policy should be devised in such a way that everyone will understand what should or should not be done." The original of the document carried an endorsement of the proposals in the handwriting of Mr. Khamenei himself. The key change, embodied in the government's circular, was that actions taken against the Bahá'ís would have to be controlled, and the most flagrant types of persecution restrained, in order to minimize the response of the international community.

On 10 March 1993 a further strong resolution was passed at the 49th Session of the Commission on Human Rights by a margin of 22 votes to 11, with 14 abstentions, noting "that there was no appreciable progress in the Islamic Republic of Iran towards improved compliance with human rights standards in conformity with international instruments."³⁶ Once again, the mandate of the Special Representative was renewed for a year and the matter would continue to be on the agenda of the General Assembly as a matter of priority. The stance of the Government of Iran continued to be one of maintaining that it respects human rights, and attributing the pressure of the Commission to the influence of Western governments hostile to the Iranian government.

Despite the repeated protestations by various representatives of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran that the Bahá'í community is not being persecuted, the evidence seems to indicate that the intentions of the regime remain the same: to suffocate the Bahá'í community while trying to minimize negative reaction from the international community.

Conclusion

When the case of Iran's Bahá'í minority was first introduced in the United Nations human rights system ten years ago, the community in Bahá'u'lláh's native land faced the threat of eventual extinction. Influential voices in the revolutionary regime had made clear their belief that the Bahá'í Faith was a "satanic" influence, that the Bahá'í community had no place in Iran's future, and that its members were "apostates" subject to the death penalty if they did not recant their beliefs and convert to Islám. The energy of the pogrom thus launched, together with the overwhelming resources available to those who inspired it, made the threat fully credible to anyone familiar with the situation.

Today, while Iran's Bahá'í community is still excluded from the protection which the Constitution and the laws assure to other segments of the society, and while its members

suffer various forms of discrimination, the threat to its existence has been effectively lifted. Until the 1992 execution of Mr. Bahman Samandari, there had been no executions for four years. As of April 1993, only 7 members of the Faith remain in prison, most Bahá'í children have been re-enrolled in school, the prevailing economic discrimination is beginning to give way, and a small number of Bahá'ís have even been permitted to travel out of the country. Bahá'ís continue to suffer major deprivations in the areas of employment, retirement pensions, and access to university as well as a renewed threat to their personal property.

The most serious disabilities under which the community still labors are the denial of any form of freedom to practice its religion and the refusal of the authorities to return its desecrated shrines and other properties. It is these communal, as well as individual, human rights that are the focus of the continuing efforts of the Bahá'í International Community in the United Nations human rights system.

The United Nations human rights system is slow and admittedly cumbersome. Its requirements do not accord easily, if at all, with simultaneous recourse to the familiar weapons of political partisanship. As the case of Iran's Bahá'í minority convincingly demonstrates, however, it constitutes an enormous leap forward in the world's efforts to protect the human rights of oppressed people. In the view of Bahá'ís everywhere it represents humanity's best hope in this vital field of concern.

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1. Michael M.J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 281.
 2. Richard W. Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979), 88.
 3. Prior to the Islamic revolution there were an estimated 400,000 Bahá'ís in Iran. The most recent (1978) census figures indicate that Iran has about 300,000 Christians, 80,000 Jews, and 30,000 Zoroastrians: *Europa Year Book*, 1989, 425-453.
 4. The Báb (lit., "Door" or "Gate", i.e., of the expected universal revelation) was born `Alí-Muammad, in Shíráz on 20 October 1819.
 5. The Báb referred to this figure as "He Whom God will make manifest".
 6. Bahá'u'lláh (lit., "Glory of God") was born Husayn-`Alí, a member of a noble family, in Teheran on 12 November 1817. It was the Báb who first formally addressed him as "Bahá'u'lláh."
 7. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), 250.
 8. Bahá'ís regard the League of Nations and the United Nations Organization as initial stages in the gradual establishment of world government.
 9. *The Six Year Plan 1986-1992: Summary of Achievements* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1993), 111-114.
 10. *Britannica Yearbook*, 1988, shows the Bahá'í Faith, despite its relatively small membership, as one of the most widely diffused religions on earth, second only to Christianity.
 11. For a more detailed treatment of the subject see Douglas Martin, *The Persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran, 1844-1984* (Association for Bahá'í Studies, Ottawa, 1984), 15-29.
 12. The two administrations referred to are those of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, appointed by the Ayatollah Khomeini immediately following the revolution, and President Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, elected at the beginning of 1980, but overthrown

- and forced to flee in June, 1981.
13. In an interview with Professor James Cockroft of Rutgers University, published in *Seven Days*, 23 February 1979.
 14. Yusuf Subhani, a highly regarded member of the Teheran Bahá'í community, was executed on 27 June 1980. To date, a total of 162 Iranian Bahá'ís have been executed, an additional 27 have been killed while in government custody, and 26 have been killed by mobs. The great majority of the victims were members of the national or local Spiritual Assemblies, clearly chosen in a campaign intended to destroy the community's elected leadership. The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy.
 15. For detailed documentation of these abuses see the successive submissions made by the Bahá'í International Community to United Nations human rights agencies. See also a detailed study of the persecutions in Douglas Martin, *Persecution*, 31-66.
 16. See *New York Times*, 21 July 1980; *The Times*, London, July 15 and 30 August 1980; *Le Monde*, 29 August 1980; *The Sunday Statesman*, New Delhi, 20 July 1980; *Newsweek*, 24 March 1980.
 17. See for example, statements of the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires (26 September 1979), and the Iranian consulate in Manchester, England (21 September 1979). Similar charges were made on PBS's "McNeil-Lehrer Report", 12 February 1980, by Mansour Farhang, the regime's spokesman and later representative at the United Nations. Farhang subsequently rebroke with the regime and repudiated his allegations against the Iranian Bahá'í community (*The Nation*, 27 February 1982), claiming that he had been misled by what he now regarded as a "fascist totalitarian ideology" that had seized control of his country.
 18. The organization that took the lead in this campaign was the Mujahhidin-Khalq (Islamic Marxists).
 19. Nabil's Narrative, xxxv.
 20. Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran: 1785-1906* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 151.
 21. "The Bahá'í International Community" is a Non-Governmental Organization holding consultative status with ECOSOC and UNICEF. It collaborates with a range of other United Nations agencies in various social and economic development projects throughout the world.
 22. "Note by the Secretary-General", No. E/CN.4/1517, 31 December 1981, and "Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1982/27 on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran", 11 March 1982.
 23. See series of articles in *Le Monde*, 30 December 1981, 1, 5, 8, 9 January 1982.
 24. *Khabar-i-Junúb*, Shíráz, 22 February 1983.
 25. After announcing the ban, the statement of the Attorney-General goes on to say: "If a Bahá'í himself performs his religious acts in accordance with his own beliefs, such a man will not be bothered by us, provided he does not invite others to the Bahá'í Faith, does not teach, does not form assemblies, does not give news to others, and has nothing to do with the administration." (*Kayhan*, 21 September 1983).
 26. "Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1984/54 on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran", 14 March 1984.
 27. "Report on the Human Rights Situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran by Special

- Representative of the Commission on Human Rights... pursuant to Commission resolution 1989/66" No. E/CN.4/1990/24, 12 February 1990.
28. "Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1990/79 on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran", 7 March 1990.
 29. "Report of the Economic and Social Council, Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Note by the Secretary-General", No. A/45/697, 6 November 1990, 17.
 30. "Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1991/82 on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran".
 31. "Report on the Human Rights Situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran by Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights ... pursuant to Commission Resolution 1991", No. E/CN.4/1992/34, 2 January 1992.
 32. Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1992, on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, 3 March 1992.
 33. Resolution No. E/CN.4/Sub.2/RES/1992/15, 27 August 1992.
 34. Resolution 47/146 of the United Nations General Assembly, 18 December 1992.
 35. "Final Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran by the Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights, Mr. Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, pursuant to Commission Resolution 1992/67 of 4 March 1992", No. E/CN.4/1993/41, 28 January 1993.
 36. Resolution E/CN.4/RES/1992/62 of the Commission on Human Rights, 10 March 1993.

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