

Last month, after a United Nations report criticised Iran's human-rights record, the Khomeini government invited the UN to send an envoy to investigate the charges. The plight of Iran's 300,000 Bahais has aroused particular concern. Irene Ertugrul describes their position as a religious minority in Iran and the historical background of their beliefs and practices.

The plight of a troubled minority

Although Bahais assert that their faith is an independent religion, Muslims regard it as a pernicious heresy within Islam. Consequently the Bahais, and the Babis who preceded them, have often faced repression, especially in Iran, the birthplace of Bahaism.

Under the Qajars and the Pahlavis, Iran's Bahais were constantly harassed and sometimes subjected to murder and torture, often instigated by religious leaders and political groups. Their situation became even worse with the victory of the Islamic Revolution in early 1979. A determined campaign was launched to eradicate the faith from Iran, even though the Bahais now comprise the country's largest religious minority.

In an interview given shortly before his return from exile, Ayatollah Khomeini promised full respect for religious minorities, affirming that Islam would adopt "a humanistic attitude" and that there should be no reason to fear. But later he remarked: "They [the Bahais] are a political faction: they are harmful; they will not be accepted."

Various tactics are now being used, including the arrest and execution of prominent Bahais, the confiscation of the assets of the Bahai community and the exertion of financial pressure and intimidation, in order to force Bahais to renounce their faith. In August 1980 all nine members and two appointed officials of the Bahai National Spiritual Assembly were arrested by Revolutionary Guards and have not been seen since.

Eight months later, two members of the Shiraz Local Spiritual Assembly were executed on charges of "assisting Zionism and Savak", as well as being members of the Bahai hierarchy - the first instance of such a role being designated a capital offence. At the end of 1981 those elected to replace the national leaders were rounded up and executed. In January 1982 six members of Tehran's Local Spiritual Assembly were shot, together with the woman at whose house they were meeting.

Iranian officials have repeatedly denied that these people were executed for being Bahais. A spokesman for the Iranian

Embassy in London told *The Middle East*: "Do you think that, after so many people have given their lives to institute an Islamic regime in Iran, anyone would be executed if he were not guilty of the offences charged?" But no evidence has been made public (even to the victims' relatives) to substantiate the various political charges made against them.

Since the start of the revolution some 120 Bahais, many of them prominent members of the community, have been killed and more than 200 imprisoned. In cases where formal accusations have been made, they have reportedly been accompanied by offers to drop the charges if the Bahai repudiates his faith. No action has been taken against those who have murdered Bahais and investigations into these cases have been cursory.

Economic pressure has also been applied. All community property, including the investments which supported a wide range

of charitable activities, has been confiscated. Homes, businesses and farms have been looted or destroyed.

Many graveyards have been vandalised, and the most sacred Bahai shrine in Iran, the Shiraz home of the Bab, was attacked in September 1979 and completely dismantled to make way for a square and roads.

Many Bahais have lost their jobs in government-controlled institutions, now that regulations barring Bahais from state employment are being rigidly enforced - whereas under the Shah officials often turned a blind eye when Bahai abilities and qualifications were needed. Students who have received government grants to train in education and health have been ordered to repay the money and, according to some sources, Bahais sacked from employment will have to repay their salaries. Since the autumn of 1981 many Bahai children have been denied admission to state schools and are now being tutored at home.

A far-flung community of more than two million

Various national and international organisations have protested to the Iranian government and in March 1982 the United Nations Human Rights Commission adopted a resolution calling upon the UN secretariat to monitor what it called "the perilous situation facing the Bahais in Iran". Since then, fewer Bahais have been executed. "The Iranian government knows it is being watched," the Bahai liaison officer at the UN said, but in late 1982 arrests were stepped up again.

Today worldwide Bahai membership exceeds two million, about a third of whom



Bahais in Austria highlighting persecution in Iran

The Bab and his successors

Enmity towards the Bahais is largely theological. Both Babism and Bahaism claimed to be new revelations superseding the Quran. Thus, in recognising either faith, Muslims would be denying their own creed: that Muhammad's message is valid for all time and for all men.

In the early 16th century Iran had turned to Shi'ism in its Jaafari form, after adhering to Sunnism for the previous 900 years. The Jaafari Shiites believe that the Twelfth Imam (in a line of succession from Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law) went into concealment while still an infant. One day he will return as the saviour, but until then his community is destined to suffer under the rule of the unjust.

In 1844 Sayyid Ali Muhammad of Shiraz claimed to be the Bab (or gate) to the Hidden Imam and, as his vice-regent, to be entitled to rule over the faithful. The Bab's following quickly grew as many Iranians, facing increasing foreign encroachment, sought national regeneration through religious revivalist movements. Soon the Bab even tried to bring the Shah into an alliance. "If you pledge allegiance to me and regard obedience to me as obligatory," read his message to Muhammad Shah, "then I will make your sovereignty great and bring foreign powers under your sway." But the Shah brushed aside these overtures and in 1847 ordered the Bab to be put under house arrest, provoking him and his followers into open confrontation with the regime.

In 1848 the Bab proclaimed himself to be the Hidden Imam returned and ordered the laws of Islam to be abrogated. He declared that a new religion, with its own legal system and scriptures, would now be given to the world. The Quran had been sufficient for its time, the Bab explained, but the world was now ready for a contemporary message - his own teachings, summarised in the *Bayan*.

In 1850 the Bab was executed after being convicted of heresy. As a result of clashes between Babi adherents and government troops in the two preceding years some 3,000-4,000 Babis were killed. In 1852, after Babi followers had tried unsuccessfully to assassinate Nasir al-Din Shah, many Babis were imprisoned and 50 executed. Those who remained had to keep their beliefs hidden or emigrate to Baghdad.

The early years of exile in Iraq saw struggles for leadership and disputes over doctrine, since carrying out the Bab's religious prescriptions depended on the establishment of a Babi state, which had clearly become impossible. Eventually Baha Allah assumed the leadership of the movement.



Abdel-Baha receiving a knighthood from the British

Babi doctrines continued to win converts from among the many Iranian pilgrims who visited Shiite shrines in Iraq, and the Iranian government pressed the Ottoman authorities in Iraq either to repatriate Baha Allah or move him further from the Iranian frontier. In 1863, shortly before he was moved to Edirne (Adrianople), Baha Allah proclaimed that he was the new prophet whom the Bab had predicted would follow him.

In accordance with the Bab's concept of successive divine revelations to meet the changing needs of mankind, Baha Allah announced that he would issue a new scripture. *Sobh-e Azal* and his followers refused to accept this and the Babis split into two sects, the Azalis and the Bahais. *Sobh-e Azal*, remaining loyal to the Bab's doctrines, was exiled to Famagusta, Cyprus, which became the headquarters of the Azali sect.

Baha Allah, on the other hand, quickly distanced his teachings from those of the Bab. He recognised the Bab as the prophet who succeeded Muhammad and as his own forerunner, but tried to erase the Babi legacy of challenging secular authority. The Bahais were expected to be loyal to whatever government was in power. Carrying arms was forbidden, except in times of necessity, and unbelievers were to be won over by peaceful proselytisation. The burning of books, the destruction of shrines and the shunning of non-believers were also discarded. And although the Bahais retained as an ultimate goal a world commonwealth of theocratic states governed by Bahai institutions, its attainment was indefinitely postponed.

In 1868 Baha Allah and his followers were moved from Edirne to the Palestinian town of Acre. At first they

were confined to a barracks but later Baha Allah was allowed a comfortable villa on the outskirts of town. He died in 1892 at the age of 75. The most important of his texts, the *Kitab al-Aqdas* (The Most Holy Book), was written to supersede the *Bayan*.

Abdel-Baha, Baha Allah's eldest son, was designated leader of the Bahai community. He travelled widely in Europe and North America, winning many converts to the faith. He often visited the slum areas of cities, where he pleaded for the rights of minorities.

During the First World War he organised a campaign to grow food for the population of Acre, when the town's normal stock was requisitioned. In 1920, a year before he died, Britain gave him a knighthood for his "consistently loyal service to the British cause since the occupation".

Abdel-Baha decreed in his will that the Bahais should be governed by a Universal House of Justice, headed by a guardian empowered to interpret the Bahai scriptures (the writings of the Bab, Baha Allah and himself). The guardianship was to remain in Baha Allah's family, going to its most capable member. Shoghi Effendi, Abdel-Baha's eldest grandson, then a second-year student at Oxford, was chosen.

Shoghi Effendi did much to demarcate the Bahai religion from Islam, spreading the faith beyond the Middle East. He abandoned his grandfather's habit of attending Friday prayers in a mosque and translated many of Baha Allah's and Abdel-Baha's texts into English. With his death in 1957 the line of succession was broken, since he had no children, and the leadership was placed in the hands of the Universal House of Justice, first elected in 1963.

in India. In Iran the Bahai community is estimated at about 300,000, although 10,000 have recently fled. Like Judaism and Islam, Bahaiism teaches that God is unknowable but makes himself known through prophets. As the culture of civilisation developed, prophets such as Adam, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Muhammad, the Bab and Baha Allah were sent, the Bahais believe, to guide mankind with a creed and a set of laws suitable to contemporary conditions. The Bab was the last in the cycle of prophets which began with Adam, they believe, and Baha Allah started a new cycle which will last for some 500,000 years. Baha Allah's message will in time become universal, although this is not expected to happen for at least 10 centuries.

The rights of women - and the divine right of kings

Children of the Bahais are not automatically enrolled in the faith at birth. They are free to choose, on reaching maturity, whether they wish to belong. An emphasis is placed on equality of the sexes. Although Baha Allah allowed men to have two wives, his successors have discouraged this practice. Education is valued and Bahais believe that if facilities for limited girls should be given priority. The education of women is of greater importance than the education of men, for "we are the mothers of the race," Baha Allah said in 1912.

The Bahais are opposed to communism, socialism and believe monarchy enjoys divine sanction. But they oppose religious, racial, national or class prejudice and believe societies where there are extremes of wealth and poverty. In their striving to promote world peace and unity, they support international organisations such as the United Nations and advocate the development of an international language to be taught as a second tongue. Every five years members of the national assemblies throughout the world elect a Universal House of Justice, convening in Haifa, which was chosen by Baha Allah during his exile from Iran to serve as the Bahai headquarters.

The Bahai administrative hierarchy, though not responsible for the administration of sacraments, acts as the defender of orthodox doctrine and can legislate on matters not dealt with in the faith's scriptures. Daily prayer is regarded as a personal obligation, but on the first day of each of the 19 months Bahais are urged to gather for a meeting where Bahai and other sacred texts are read, communal matters are discussed and a small meal is taken. These meetings are usually at members' homes, although in Europe and North America Houses of Worship (domed buildings with nine entrances) have been built. In addition, pilgrimages should be made to Baha Allah's house in Baghdad,

the Bab's house in Shiraz and to the tombs of the Bab and Abdel-Baha in Haifa as well as to Baha Allah's tomb near Acre.

Bahaiism's success in gaining adherents throughout the world is mainly due to its acceptance of all previously revealed religions as part of one evolving faith (with its own doctrines regarded as the most suitable for the present age). But its international character and Westernised attitudes have only served to deepen antipathy towards it in some quarters. Because Bahai women are neither veiled nor segregated from men at Bahai gatherings, tales of rampant immorality have spread in some Middle Eastern states.

In Iran Bahai marriages are not considered valid and their children are therefore deemed illegitimate. Successive Iranian constitutions have recognised only followers of the Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian faiths who have protection as *dhimmi*s (non-Muslims living under Muslim domination).

Bleak prospects for the Bahais' future

The Bahais are often viewed as belonging to a clandestine network of mutual assistance, similar to the Freemasons, and charged with working in the interests of Western imperialism and Zionism. Because the Bahai faith developed during the British mandate in Palestine, a connection with Britain is inevitably made, and Abdel-Baha's knighthood is regarded as proof of this. Charges of Zionist ties arise from the fact that the Bahai headquarters is located in Haifa. Iranian Bahais often travelled to Israel and sent regular contributions there. Since 1979, however, when travel and the transfer of funds from Iran to Israel became illegal, these activities have ceased, but the Bahais see no reason to relocate their world headquarters for reasons of immediate political expediency.

Tension has sometimes been increased because of the political stands taken by the Bahais. Because of Baha Allah's injunction to support any government in power and their preference for monarchy, Iran's Bahais did not support demands for a constitution and saw Muhammad Ali Shah, who tried to overthrow the 1906 constitution, as a "just king". During the 1978-79 revolution, they said prayers for Muhammad Raza Shah and made no denunciations of Savak. These attitudes flew in the face of popular sentiment and the views of the Shiite clergy, who believe monarchy to be fundamentally unjust.

The situation of the Bahais in Iran is therefore complex. They hope one day to be recognised as a separate religion and so be granted constitutional protection, but this would be likely only if a secular government were established in Iran. Meanwhile, prejudices against the Bahais run deep, especially among those who have had no personal contact with them. □

Sayings of the Month

"The presence of warships sometimes seems to have a deterring effect on Libyan adventurism"

Jeane Kirkpatrick
US ambassador to the UN

"Well, I don't believe there has been any naval movement of any kind"

Ronald Reagan
US President

"My country is being punished by America today because of its adherence to the principles of the non-aligned. It is paying the price of its non-alignment"

Major Abdel-Salam Jalloud
Libya's second-in-command

"I see no sign of a crisis or a possible aggression against Sudan at the moment"

Marshal Abu Ghazala
Egyptian Defence Minister

"For the moment Qaddafi is back in his box, where he belongs"

George Shultz
US Secretary of State

"What we do most certainly share with the Opec countries and indeed with the rest of the world is a desire not to see an exaggerated fall in the world oil price now which would inevitably be followed by a sharp and damaging rebound later on"

Nigel Lawson
British Secretary of State for Energy

"I don't think Mrs Thatcher would be disappointed to see the price disappear through the floor if that is what the market dictates"

British government source
quoted in the *Sunday Times*

"The Gulf Co-operation Council states can easily flood the international market with cheaper oil without being affected, because the cost of production is very low. This means that the new oil producers in industrial countries, who entered the field because of the high price of oil, will face economic catastrophe along with their investors if oil prices are reduced sharply"

Al-Seyassah, Kuwaiti newspaper

"If Lebanon does not triumph over the present situation, its environment will fall into chaos and loss. If Lebanon is divided, then every united political presence in the entire area will be divided ... Lebanon has become a key to war in the area just as it is a key to peace"

Amin Gemayel
Lebanese President





