



# BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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## **Status of the Bahá'ís in Iran: Basic Facts and Updates June 8, 2020**

- Some 300,000 Bahá'ís live throughout Iran, making the Bahá'í Faith the country's largest minority religion. Although originating in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century, the Bahá'í Faith has become a global religion with over five million followers in over 200 countries and territories. It is an independent religion – not a sect of Islam – with its own sacred scriptures which recognize the divine origin of all of the world's great religious systems, the oneness of the human race, the equality of men and women, the harmony of science and religion, and the importance of universal education. It eschews violence.
- While Bahá'ís in Iran have been persecuted since the religion began there in the nineteenth century, the persecution has greatly intensified since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. More than 200 Bahá'ís were killed between 1978 and 1998, the majority by execution, and thousands more were imprisoned. Individuals who had been elected by their fellow believers to national and local administrative positions were particularly targeted and executed in the 1980s and formal Bahá'í administration – there is no clergy in the Baha'i Faith – was outlawed. In 2008, all seven members of an informal national leadership group known as the Yaran (the “friends”), were arrested and served ten-year sentences, which were completed in 2018. On a number of occasions, the government of Iran used the members of this group to communicate to the Bahá'í community prior to their arrest.
- Economic and social pressure on Iran's Bahá'í community is acute. Government jobs have been denied to Bahá'ís since the years immediately following the Revolution. Muslims are often pressured to refuse employment to Bahá'ís and to dismiss Bahá'ís from their employment in the private sector. Bahá'ís are also often denied business licenses and thus cannot open their own businesses. Bahá'í marriages are not recognized. Bahá'ís are excluded from public universities, and university students discovered to be Bahá'ís are expelled. At times, the government permits the enrollment of a few students known to be Bahá'ís so that it may publicly state that Bahá'ís are enrolled in university – only to expel them later and prohibit them from graduating. Bahá'í school children are frequently harassed by classmates, teachers, and administrators. Bahá'í homes and businesses are raided by government agents and the property of Bahá'ís is often confiscated without compensation. Bahá'í holy places have been attacked and destroyed. Bahá'ís are not permitted to bury their dead according to Bahá'í law, and Bahá'í cemeteries have been vandalized, desecrated and destroyed. Since President Rouhani came to power, there have been at least 803 documented incidents of economic persecution or discrimination. Between July 2018 and November 2018, 109 Bahá'í students reported being denied higher education in the 2018-2019 school year on the basis of having an “incomplete file.” In 2019, the Government excluded Bahá'ís from obtaining I.D. cards essential for most daily transactions by eliminating the religious category “other” on the cards. This had been used by religious groups not recognized in Iran's constitution.
- Iran's state-sponsored news media systematically disseminate propaganda intended to incite hatred against Iran's Bahá'í community. This propaganda often scapegoats Bahá'ís for economic and political unrest in Iran, and is characterized by a range of baseless accusations, including espionage, promiscuity, sexual deviance, armed rebellion, brainwashing and “cult-like” practices, opposition to the government, threatening national security, and blasphemy and animosity towards Islam. There has been a recent surge in this type of propaganda. In 2014, the number of anti-Bahá'í pieces rose to approximately 400 per month and in 2016, it jumped to approximately 1,500 per month. It averaged approximately 400 per month from October 1, 2017 to November 1, 2018. Since January 2014, there have been more than 36,002 articles, videos, or web pages appearing in government-controlled or government-sponsored media featuring anti-Bahá'í propaganda.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic**

- The COVID-19 pandemic has created additional dangers for the Bahá'ís in Iran. Bahá'ís are being called to court in far greater numbers, are being sentenced to longer terms in prison, are being summoned to coronavirus-infested prisons, and are facing an increasingly systematic effort to promote hate speech and disinformation about the Bahá'í Faith. The authorities have targeted at least 71 Bahá'ís in recent weeks (February 2020 until the end of May). Specifically, 55 Bahá'ís have been summoned to court in Shiraz, Birjand, Karaj, and Kermanshah. Of this number, 26 have been tried and sentenced. An additional 11 have been summoned to prison in Shiraz, Ghaemshahr, and Birjand. Three have been arrested in Yazd and two were arrested in Isfahan and released shortly thereafter. To further incite hatred against the Iranian Bahá'í community, in March 2020, Iranian state-controlled media reported that a Member of Parliament accused the Bahá'ís of hoarding masks and other essential supplies needed for the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education**

- The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) is an informal higher education system created in 1987 by members of the Bahá'í community in Iran as a response to the expulsion of Bahá'í students and educators from Iranian universities. In 1998, 2001, and 2002, a series of raids resulted in arrests of BIHE faculty and staff and the seizure of equipment and materials.
- In May 2011, the Government of Iran again raided the homes of individuals associated with BIHE, searching approximately 39 homes, seizing educational materials, and arresting, at that time, 18 individuals. Further arrests followed. In June 2011, following the May raids, state-sponsored media reported that the government had declared BIHE to be illegal.
- Since May 2011, 19 Baha'is have completed sentences of four or five years for teaching or administering in BIHE. (One of the 19 was released before completing his sentence.) Currently, only one instructor, Ms. Negin Ghedamian, has not completed her sentence. She is due to complete her five-year sentence around November 2022. BIHE continues to operate discreetly, as faculty and students are very much aware of the possibility of imprisonment for providing or receiving tertiary education.