



BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Status of the Bahá'ís in Iran: Basic Facts and Updates: November 23, 2021

- Some 300,000 Bahá'ís live throughout Iran, making the Bahá'í Faith the country's largest non-Muslim, minority religion. Although originating in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century, the Bahá'í Faith has become a global religion with over eight 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, the elimination of racial prejudice as a foundation of world peace and the importance of universal education. It rejects violence as a tool for religious or social change.
- 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 220 Bahá'ís were killed between 1978 and 1998, the majority by execution, and thousands more were imprisoned. In August 1980, the nine-member, annually elected national Bahá'í governing council, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran, was abducted and disappeared, never to be heard from since. Eight out of nine of their successors were also seized. This group of eight was executed on December 27, 1981 after a summary trial. A BBC documentary film titled *Iranian Revolutionary Justice* documents their trial utilizing restored film footage that was taken out of Iran a few years ago. It provides a real view of how a sham trial operates in the Iranian judicial system. In 1983, formal Bahá'í administration (there is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith) was outlawed and, in obedience to the law, disbanded itself. 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. Ironically, on a number of occasions, the government of Iran had utilized 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. Bahá'ís are barred from government jobs. Since the public sector makes up more than half of the Iranian economy, this is a severe blow. This began immediately following the Revolution. In the private sector, Muslims are often pressured to refuse employment to Bahá'ís and to dismiss them from their employment in the private sector. Pursuant to a 2006 government directive, Bahá'ís are excluded from 25 professions some on the basis of being ritually “unclean.” Many Bahá'ís have found that being small shop owners is the only way to survive but, even in this area, they have been subject to closure of their shops or the refusal to renew licenses. 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 schoolchildren are frequently harassed by classmates, teachers, and administrators. On September 21, 2020, the minutes of a meeting among provincial and municipal authorities in the city of Sari in the province of Mazandaran outlined directives which, among other disturbing things, directed the Department of Education in Sari to “increase the level of alertness and awareness among school principals and educators on their handling of Bahá'í students in order to bring them to Islam ... [and] make efforts to prepare for ways to identify Bahá'í students.”

- Bahá'í homes and businesses are raided by government agents and the property of Bahá'ís is often confiscated without compensation. On August 1, 2020, Branch 54 of the Special Court for Article 49 [which provision outlines the government's power to confiscate property] of the Constitution issued a "final and binding" order concluding that it was illegal for Bahá'ís to own property in the Village of Ivel. Shortly after, Branch 8 of the Court of Appeals of Mazandaran Province ruled that a claim brought by 27 Bahá'ís detailing the demolition of 50 Bahá'í homes and seizure of their land in Ivel in June 2010 was without merit because the perpetrators' actions violated no laws. The court cited the August 1, 2020 decision of Branch 54 as support for its ruling that property ownership by the 27 plaintiffs in Ivel was without legal validity due to their membership in the Bahá'í Faith.
- In November 2020, raids took place in seven cities across Iran on several dozen Bahá'í homes during which property deeds were confiscated. Recently, in August 2021, the government [announced](#) that the properties of six Bahá'ís in Semnan – whose deeds were seized in the November raids – would be confiscated. On November 3, 2021, the government [seized lands](#) owned by Baha'ís in the village of Roshankoo.
- Bahá'í holy places have been attacked and destroyed since 1979. Bahá'ís are often 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. For instance, 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."
- 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 was approximately 400 per month on average. During the six-month period through April 2020, the average was 707 per month. During the six-month period through April 2021, the average was 966 per month.

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 as noted above, are facing an increasingly systematic effort to promote hate speech and disinformation about the Bahá'í Faith. 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. Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a surge in criminal judicial proceedings brought against the Bahá'ís across Iran, threatening to add to the dozens of already incarcerated Bahá'ís, who are endangered by the pandemic in overcrowded Iranian prisons. Most recently, coordinated raids took place in late October 2020 on about 20 Bahá'í homes across Iran. Laptops, mobile phones, and other personal effects were taken, together with property deeds. In

April through early May 2021, dozens of Bahá'í homes were raided in Baharestan, Shiraz, and Isfahan with over twenty Bahá'ís taken into custody and more who can be called to prison at any time.

Arbitrary Arrests and Imprisonment

- On December 24, 2020, eight Bahá'ís in the port city of Bandar Abbas, were sentenced to two years of imprisonment under tazir (discretionary sharia) law. As a supplementary punishment, four of these individuals were banned from membership in social and political parties and groups, including feasts – the name used by Bahá'ís for their community gatherings at the beginning of each Bahá'í month -- and attending Bahá'í gatherings for a period of two years. In addition, they are mandated to attend five sessions of counselling on sectarian issues. This is the first time Bahá'ís were sentenced to re-education classes.

The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education –Bahá'ís have not been passive despite being nonviolent

- 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 and exclusion 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 an October 29, 1998 article in the New York Times after the September 29, 1998 raids on over 500 homes across Iran, columnist Ethan Bronner described the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education as “an elaborate act of communal self-preservation.”
- 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, 20 Bahá'ís have completed sentences of four or five years for teaching or administering in BIHE. The last remaining imprisoned instructor, Ms. Negin Ghedamian, was released early from Evin Prison in July 2020. She had been expected to be in prison until 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. In June 2018, it was granted a license by the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, which license was renewed most recently on April 8, 2021 to permit U.S. citizens and U.S. residents, acting at the request of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education, to provide online instruction to Bahá'í students in Iran.

Reasons for Hope in Spite of the Acute Persecution That Continues:

- It is fairly reasonable to conclude that, despite continued government hostility and hate propaganda, the attitude of the average citizen towards the Bahá'ís has changed significantly. Whereas 30 years ago, if asked what he or she thought of the Bahá'ís, the average citizen might say that the Bahá'í Faith is a false religion, opposes Islam, and conducts spying for Israel and the United States, today, the average person would probably simply say it's too bad what's been happening to the Bahá'ís. (This does not ignore the fact that the regime still commands the loyalty of millions of often hardline followers. However, this hardline group is, today, a minority of the population.) This change in attitude is probably due to a number of factors, including:

- The Internet, which is probably the single biggest factor, providing readily available, accurate information about the Bahá'í Faith that was, for a while, not robustly challenged online by the government. It appears that it took the government a few years to become fully aware of the influence of online media and to develop propaganda outlets to counter the new sources of accurate information. By that time, segments of the public had developed favorable views of the Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í Faith.
- The regime, which has largely discredited itself. This has been clear to most of the public for at least 15 years and undermines its propaganda.
- The Bahá'í response to 40 years of persecution, despite extreme provocation, has been peaceful and the average citizen probably knows this.
- Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi's decision, announced in 2008, to represent the informal Bahá'í leadership group, the Yaran, signaled to many Iranians that they must be wrongly accused.
- A 2008 statement by Ayatollah Khomeini's one-time successor, Hussein Ali Montazeri, indicating that Bahá'ís, although holding some beliefs that, according to him, Muslims must regard as false, should, nevertheless, as Iranians, be granted the rights of citizens.
- A 2009 open letter addressed to the Bahá'í community and signed by over 250 prominent Iranian intellectuals and artists, mainly in the diaspora, expressing "shame" for the manner in which Iran has treated its Bahá'í minority.

The U.S. Government Response

- Every U.S. Administration over nearly four decades has been supportive of the Bahá'ís, speaking out on their behalf. The U.S. Congress has passed resolutions in almost every Congress, condemning the persecution and shining a light on a situation, which, if left unaddressed by the U.S. Government and the international community, would undoubtedly have been much worse.
- On December 7, 2020, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed H.Res.823 condemning the persecution of the Bahá'ís, calling for the release of all prisoners held on account of their religion, including Bahá'í prisoners, and calling on the President and the Secretary of State to impose sanctions on individual Iranian officials responsible for human rights abuses. On April 28, 2021, Senator Ron Wyden, together with initial cosponsors Senators Boozman, Durbin and Rubio, introduced [S.Res.183](#) condemning the ongoing and recent actions taken against the Bahá'ís. On October 25, 2021, Congressman Deutch, together with initial cosponsors McCall, Meeks, Wilson, Schakowsky, Chabot, Schneider, Wagner, Connolly, and Smith introduced [H.Res.744](#).