

The Specter of Ideological Genocide: The Bahá'ís of Iran*

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Abstract

This paper describes the attempts of Iranian governments and the clerical establishments of the past 150 years to cripple or suffocate the Iranian Bahá'í community. The paper outlines the steps undertaken to exterminate the Bahá'í Community through physically, mentally, emotionally and culturally oppressive means. The motivational sources and socio-cultural circumstances leading to the mistreatment of the Bahá'ís are going to be explored, as well as

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the initiatives taken by the Bahá'ís of Iran and Bahá'ís around the world to deter their eradication. As such, the Bahá'ís of Iran are a case in point that intentful organized action can prevent ideological genocide.

The 20th century will not only be remembered for its extraordinary scientific achievements, but also for the horrendous mass killings, genocide and politicide it has witnessed. Thirty-six episodes have been registered between 1955 and 1998 alone, where regimes have targeted ethnic, religious, or political groups for destruction, in whole or part (Harff, Gurr and Unger, 1999, p. 1). In order to explain how genocide evolves and how it could be prevented, genocide researchers frequently turn to cases such as the Holocaust of Nazi Germany, the Turkish Genocide of the Armenians, Paul Pot's auto-genocide in Cambodia, the mass killings in Argentina (Staub, 1989), or, most recently, the genocides that have taken place in Rwanda, East Timor, and former Yugoslavia.

The Iranian Bahá'í Community is an example of a minority group that throughout its 150 year history has suffered ongoing persecutions and attempts of what Smith (1998) terms as "ideological genocide"¹; it also is one of the

¹ The Genocide Convention adopted by the United Nations defines the crime of genocide as "acts committed with the intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group" by killing members of the group, causing them serious bodily or mental harm, creating conditions calculated to bring about their physical destruction,

few documented cases of a minority that has managed to resist peacefully, and to somewhat protect itself by rallying world public opinion in support of its struggle for survival. As such, the case of the Bahá'ís of Iran serves as a case study on how ideological genocide evolves, and how those affected can persevere and survive despite all odds.

The Bahá'í Faith is an independent religion founded by Mirzá Husayn Alí (1817-1892), known as Bahá'u'lláh. It has its own sacred literature, religious and social tenets as well as practices, and is governed by democratically elected administrative bodies (Safra, Yannias and Goulka, 1998). The 1988 Britannica Book of the Year lists the Bahá'í Faith (together with Islam and Christianity) as one of the most

preventing births, or forcibly transferring children to another group (cited in Staub, 1989, p. 6).

Staub himself describes the meaning of genocide as an attempt to exterminate a racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, or political group, either directly through murder or indirectly by creating conditions that lead to the group's destruction.

Ideological genocide is defined as a political tool used to protect and defend a particular contemporary ideology thought to be instrumental in the development of a brave new world free of offensive human material (Smith, 1998, p. 8). Smith states:

In the twentieth century, the range of victims has greatly increased; moreover, almost all of them have been selected for genocide because of *who* they are, because in the eyes of the stronger group (whether majority or minority) they do not deserve to live. The victims, otherwise so different, have only three attributes in common: for historical, situational or ideological reasons they have been defined as beyond the circle of moral obligation and thus as inhuman; they are vulnerable to genocidal attacks, whether sporadic or sustained, selective or indiscriminate.... (ibid, p. 11)

widespread global religious systems on earth (Barrett, 1988, p. 303). Counting over 5 million members worldwide, a fairly large percentage resides in its birth country Iran (over 300,000). Since the inception of the Bahá'í Faith in the middle of last century, the Bahá'í community of Iran has experienced ongoing persecutions. Since 1980, human rights bodies of the United Nations have passed several resolutions on Iran's human rights violations that made specific mention of the persecution of the Bahá'ís.

To list the Iranian Bahá'ís as a group existing on the brink of ideological genocide is warranted since the aggression it has experienced is based on the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, the Bahá'í Community as a separate religious entity (Frelick, 1987). It is 'ideological' in nature since the Iranian authorities' motives to strike violently against the Iranian Bahá'ís is based on the desire to consolidate the Islamic Revolution as the chief instrument for the purification of society and the reestablishment of Islamic law, order and justice.

This paper describes the history of persecutions of the Iranian Bahá'ís as well as the characteristics of the contemporary attempts of the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to suffocate the Iranian Bahá'í community. Next, the motivational causes and socio-political circumstances that may have led to the killings and attempted ideological genocide will be analyzed. Finally, the paper presents the efforts undertaken by Bahá'ís around the world to protest against the persecutions of Bahá'ís in Iran, and the reasons why

global advocacy was effective enough to stall the Iranian regime's intents to crush the Iranian Bahá'í community.

A review of the persecutions of the Bahá'ís in Iran

The marginalization of the Iranian Bahá'ís under the current Iranian Government is the result of historical efforts of the Shí'i clergy to devalue and persecute a religious minority. These developments are rooted in 19th Century Persia, when a young merchant, known to history as The Báb (Arabic: The Gate) (1819-1850) announced publicly his claim of being the fulfillment of Shí'i Muslim prophecies for the coming of the 12th Imam, who would restore true guidance to the Shí'i community (Nabil Zarandi, 1932; Amanat, 1989). The Báb attracted a large following from many strata of society, including influential mullas and scholars of Shí'i Islam.

Initially, the mullas hoped to stop the Bábí movement from spreading by denouncing its followers as apostates and enemies of God. These denouncements resulted in mob attacks, public executions and torture of early Bábís. When the Bábís (in accordance with Koranic principles) organized to defend themselves, the government sent troops into a series of engagements that resulted in heavy losses on both sides. The Báb himself was imprisoned from 1846 until 1850 and eventually publicly executed. In August 1852, two deranged Bábís attempted to kill the Shah in revenge for the execution of the Báb. This resulted in an extensive pogrom during which more than 20,000 Bábís – among them 400 Shí'i

mullas who had embraced the Bábí teachings – lost their lives (Phelps, 1912; Browne, 1918; Nabil Zarandi, 1932). A European envoy present in Teheran at that time has recounted as follows:

But follow me, my friend, you who lay claim to a heart and European ethics, follow me to the unhappy ones who, with gouged-out eyes, must eat, on the scene of dead, without sauce, their own amputated ears; or whose teeth are torn out with inhuman violence, by the hand of the executioner; or whose bare skulls are simply crushed by blows from a hammer, or where the bazaar is illuminated with unhappy victims, because on right and left the people dig deep holes into their breasts and shoulders and insert burning wicks in wounds. I saw some dragged in chains through the bazaar, preceded by a military band, in whom these wicks had burned so deep that now the fat flickered convulsively in the wound like a newly extinguished lamp. Not seldom it happens that the unwearying ingenuity of the Orientals leads to fresh tortures. They will skin the soles of the Bábís feet, soak the wounds in boiling oil, shoe the foot like the hoof of a horse, and compel the victim to run.... I saw corpses torn by nearly 15 bullets. The more fortunate suffered strangulation, stoning or

suffocation: they were bound before the muzzle of a mortar, cut down with swords or killed with dagger thrusts, or blows from hammers and sticks. (Goumoens, in Browne, 1918, pp. 267-271)

By 1863, Mirzá Husayn Alí – who had adapted the name Bahá'u'lláh – emerged as the new leader of the Bábí movement, recognized by the majority of its members. One of the few heads who had survived the pogrom of 1852, he was consequently banished to Iraq, later to Adrianople in Turkey and finally to the prison city of Acre in what was then part of the Ottoman empire and belongs today to Northern Israel. Bahá'u'lláh was successful in reuniting and encouraging the scattered Bábí community and eventually established his own faith community, the Bahá'í Faith.

Bahá'u'lláh's writings deal with a variety of themes that challenge long-cherished doctrines of Shí'i-Islam. In addition to making the 'heretic' claim of being a 'Manifestation of God,' he suggested that school curricula should include 'Western Sciences,' that the nation states (Muslim and non-Muslim) should establish a world federal government, and that men and women were equal. Bahá'u'lláh also wrote that in this time and age, priests were no longer necessary for religious guidance. Humanity, he argued, had reached an age of maturity where it was incumbent upon every individual to search for God and truth independently.

These principles did not only call into question the need for priesthood, but also the entire Shí'i ecclesiastical

structure and the vast system of endowments, benefices and fees that sustained it (Martin, 1984). No surprise then that in the following decades until the overthrow of the Qájár dynasty in 1925 it was the mullas who instigated attacks against the Bahá'ís in cities or villages where the clerical establishment was particularly influential. Some of these outbreaks were recorded by missionaries who happened to be at the site of massacres, such as the one in the City of Yazd in 1903, where more than 100 Bahá'ís were killed (Nash, 1982). The establishment of the constitution of 1906 provided the legal justification for treating Bahá'ís as outcasts and to deny them any form of recognition, with the result that they were legally "non-persons" in Persian public life (Martin, 1984, pp. 13-14).

Social and political tensions continued to fuel attacks against Bahá'ís prior to the Iranian Revolution, the most notable taking place in 1955 in Teheran when mullas and army officials joined hands in destroying the Bahá'í National Headquarters, and the government ordered the suppression of all Bahá'í activities. As a result, Bahá'í holy places were occupied and ransacked, homes and farms looted and burned, Bahá'í cemeteries desecrated; adults were beaten, young women abducted and forced to marry Muslims, children expelled from schools and many dismissed from their employment (Momen, 1981, p. viii). The situation advanced to a point where the complete suppression of the Bahá'í community could have become a matter of fact, had not the United Nations under Dag Hammarskjöld and the U.S. State

Department intervened on behalf of the Iranian Bahá'ís (Martin, 1984).

In the remaining years prior to the Iranian revolution, the Shah's secret service agency SAVAK and government agents sought to deflect the fury of reactionary Muslims against the Shah by provoking anti-Bahá'í hysteria. SAVAK instructed its regional directors to cooperate with the Society for Islamic Teaching in systematically suppressing the Bahá'ís, while warning that such activities must not provoke public disturbance (Mujtahid, cited in Martin, 1984, p. 33).

Already prior to his return to Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini had expressed his view of Bahá'ís as traitors, Zionists, economic plunderers and enemies of Islam (Abrahamian, 1993, p. 48). In an interview to Professor James Cockroft of Rutgers University in January 1979 he made it clear that Bahá'ís were not going to be tolerated as a religious minority:

Question: Will there be either religious or political freedom for the Bahá'ís under an Islamic government?

Answer: They are a political faction; they are harmful. They will not be accepted.

Question: How about their freedom of religion – religious practice?

Answer: No. (Cockroft, 1979, p. 20)

Bahá'í persecutions since the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Four major strategies have characterized the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran: attacks on the leadership, economic persecution, social isolation, and cultural cleansing.

Attacks on leadership

Since 1978, over 200 Bahá'ís were executed, disappeared and are presumed dead, or were killed in mob violence. Initially, members of the National Spiritual Assembly of Iran as well as different local spiritual assemblies either disappeared or were publicly executed, or shot during Bahá'í gatherings. Of the Bahá'ís executed in Iran since 1978, more than 50% have been members of Bahá'í administrative bodies (Bahá'í International Community, 1999). In addition, popular Bahá'ís were assassinated. In remote villages, mob lynchings, stoning, and deaths involving torture have been reported. One of the most dramatic executions occurred in June 1983, when ten Bahá'í women – including two teen-aged girls – were hanged for having taught Bahá'í classes, for being members of Bahá'í youth committees, for being unmarried, for allegedly being supporters of Zionism, or for refusing to recant their faith (Roohizadegan, 1993). Prominent Bahá'ís were also tortured in order to obtain videotaped confessions that the Bahá'í Faith is a network of espionage, or to pay allegiance to Shí'i Islam and disassociate themselves in writing from the

'Zionist Bahá'í Association'. These statements were to be printed in public newspapers (Abrahamian, 1999).

Economic persecution

Bahá'í private property such as stores or agricultural production sites were destroyed or expropriated. Bahá'í children were prohibited from receiving education at the university level. Several Bahá'ís who had occupied civil jobs such as doctors or nurses in public hospitals had to leave. In some cases, pension rights were suspended. Several students and some government employees were told to repay their grants or their salaries. Those who were unable to do so were imprisoned.

The financial strangulation of the Iranian Bahá'ís has resulted in losing access to quality medical services, and frequently also the cheaper and lower-quality care of the state hospitals and clinics. With the suspension of their government jobs, and private companies yielding to the pressure of not employing Bahá'ís, Bahá'ís today are effectively without health coverage. Bahá'í doctors' licenses have been revoked and even though some of them continue private practice, they are unable to prescribe clinical treatment since they are not shareholders of the hospitals. Bahá'ís are denied treatment because they are Bahá'ís (Stockman, 1999).

Social isolation

Since the early 1990s, there have been increased efforts to suffocate the Iranian Bahá'ís through more 'silent' means. Most noteworthy is a confidential circular (see Appendix A for a reprint) issued by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and signed by President Khamenei in early 1991, which – although appearing to grant a measure of protection to Bahá'ís through certain provisions – actually organized the methods of oppression used to debilitate the Bahá'ís.² The memorandum contains specific recommendations on how to block the development and the progress of the Bahá'í Community not only inside but also outside of Iran, while avoiding the most excessive types of persecutions.

The proposed strategies have taken their mental and emotional tolls in the Iranian Bahá'í Community. The denial of the right to access higher education, or the dismissal of a student in the last stages of one's studies, effectively contributes to psychological anguish of members of an oppressed group. Young women are particularly affected by such policies. Whereas in Iran men traditionally enjoy at least relative freedom of movement and social interaction, Bahá'í women's possibilities of leisure and relief are anyways severely restricted. By prohibiting access to higher education, a last chance for developing one's potential and for pursuing per-

² The existence of this so-called Golpaygani Memorandum was brought to the attention of the public in a report by the then UN Human Rights Commissioner Mr. Galindo Pohl (E/CM4/1993/41, 28 January 1993).

sonal goals was effectively blocked (Geula, Smith-Geula and Woodall, 1999).³

Another strategy capable of ‘dispiriting’ members of an oppressed community has been to deny Bahá’ís the ability to bury their dead in decent and hygienic burial grounds. After the government had also seized Bahá’í cemeteries, Bahá’ís were left without space for burying their dead (in Iran, burial grounds are segregated by religion). For a period of time, Bahá’ís were forced to bury their dead in small gardens in their backyards. In one case, a dead child had to be buried beneath the floor tiles of a Bahá’í family’s apartment. In recent years, local governments have designated burial grounds for the Bahá’ís, but these grounds are usually outside of the city, often in arid areas where water is unavailable (Geula, Smith-Geula and Woodall, 1999).

³ Between September 29 and October 3, 1998, a decentralized home-based distance university model called Bahá’í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE) – which Iranian Bahá’ís had developed over the years, and which offered academic programs to Bahá’í youth that had been excluded from access to public universities – was raided and closed by the Iranian authorities throughout Iran (Bollag, 1998; Bronner, 1998). More than 36 faculty members were arrested. Most of those arrested were released soon afterwards, but four were given prison sentences ranging from three to ten years. The arrests were carried out by officers of the Iranian Government’s intelligence agency, the Ministry of Information, and also involved the seizure of textbooks, scientific papers, and documentary records. Those arrested were asked to sign a document declaring that BIHE had ceased to exist as of September 29, and that they would no longer cooperate with it. All of the detainees refused to sign such a declaration.

Cultural cleansing

The Iranian Government also appears to be determined to rid Iran of the Bahá'í Community by obliterating its memory – through the desecration or destruction of Bahá'í Holy Sites (often historical landmarks of Iran's cultural-architectural heritage). In 1979, the house of Báb, one of the most sacred sites in the Bahá'í World, was demolished. The house of Bahá'u'lláh, where the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith spent his childhood, was demolished soon after the revolution and the site offered for sale to the public. In 1993, more than 15,000 graves were bulldozed in a well-kept Bahá'í cemetery of Tehran on the pretext of constructing a municipal center. In April 2004, the gravesite of an early Apostle of the Faith, the resting place of Mulla Muhammad-Ali Barfurushi, known as Quddus, was destroyed in Babol. In June 2004, the house of Mirzá Abbas Nuri (Bahá'u'lláh's father, an eminent provincial governor and one of Iran's outstanding calligraphers) was destroyed ostensibly for the purpose of creating an Islamic cemetery (Bahá'í World News Service, 2004).

Iran's response to the allegations of Bahá'í persecution

In response to inquiries from the international community, Iran has responded with a variety of statements that argue that Bahá'ís are not being persecuted on religious grounds, but for involvement in criminal activities. In other words, Iran claims that only Bahá'ís with criminal records

have been prosecuted in accordance with national jurisdictional laws. In statements circulated at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations (1982), as well as Iranian embassies in Canada and elsewhere (Nashr-i-Farhang-i-Inqilab-i-Islami, 1983), repeatedly claimed that Bahá'ís were enemies of the state, of the Islamic Revolution, spies employed by imperialist governments of the West, supporters of the Shah of Iran, or collaborators of SAVAK.

*Analysis of psychological and social circumstances
fueling Bahá'í persecutions in Iran*

Staub (1989, pp. 21-22) suggests that it takes a variety of factors to create a climate conducive to the emergence of group violence and genocide. Active motivation to harm a subgroup of society arises and intensifies in the course of a continuous decline of inhibitions against harming and killing people, achieved partly by excluding people from one's own 'moral universe' (Staub, 1989, p. 33). When coupled with difficult life conditions and a political culture of authoritarianism, the planning and organization of acts of mass violence becomes a real possibility.

Harff, Gurr and Unger (1999) have concluded that genocide and politicide occur frequently after a previous state failure, usually an ethnic or revolutionary war, sometimes an abrupt regime transition. They suggest that

Episodes are most likely (1) after high-magnitude political upheavals in (2) autocratic regimes whose leaders either are (3) ethnically non-representative of the larger population or (4) adherents of exclusionary ideologies. (5) A contributing societal factor is low religious diversity. (6) A strongly inhibiting international factor is a high degree of economic interconnectedness. (p. 1)

As the following analysis illustrates, most of the above mentioned components – except the argument of economic interconnectedness – can be applied to analyze and explain the Islamic Government of Iran's politics of aggression against the Bahá'ís in 20th century Iran.

Socio-cultural unease and political tensions

Already during the 19th century, Persia had become increasingly subject to Western economic penetration and domination (Amanat, 1989). In the 20th century, the Pahlavi Shahs' ambitious modernization and secularization programs were perceived as humiliating and offensive because they replaced Iranian cultural heritage with inputs from the West:

People were torn from ancestral ways, the gap between rich and the poor grew, corruption was rampant and well known, and the secret

police, with its arbitrary arrests and use of torture, turned Iranians of all levels against the regime. The presence and influence of foreigners provided major further aggravation. (Keddie, 1988, p. 305)

Feeling the need for more efficacy, control and power, different strata of Iranian society sought to counteract the generally perceived process of social disorganization. While the Pahlavis pushed for the resurrection of a pre-Arab Persian Empire, rural peasants who had migrated to the cities became attracted to subproletarian ideologies and urban-based rebellions against the dynasty. Secularized liberals and radicals wanted to bring Western values and philosophy into Iran while 'ulamás and bazaaris viewed the replacement of the Shah and his foreign supporters with a new Islamic social order as key to Iranian liberation.

Modernization, alienation and the need for an ideology of hope

Shí'i mullas had always believed they were the lawful successors of the legacy of Prophet Muhammad who is viewed by Muslims as the last of God's messengers to have addressed humanity prior to the Day of Judgment at the end of time. The clerical establishment was likened to the "mantle of the prophet" (Mottaheddeh, 1985) with privileges as well as the charge to guide society on the straight path. For the illiterate follower, a mulla provided the connection with the divine. Yet, the growing influence of the West and

the difficult life conditions of the 20th century called into question the positive legitimacy and power of the religious culture. Shí'i clergy responded to these threats by heightened zealotry to their religious mission.

Because people define themselves to a significant degree by their membership in a group, for most people a positive view of their group is essential to individual self-esteem – especially in difficult times. The need to protect and improve societal self-concept or to find a new group to identify with will be powerful....

People are energized by a sense of personal value and significance, connection to other people, the feeling of mutual support, and a view of the world that generates hope. However, when these motivations are very intense and fulfilled in certain ways, they become likely the origin of destruction. (Staub, 1989, p. 16)

It is of particular interest to see how the social tensions described earlier shaped the social context of Ayatollah Khomeini's upbringing (Algar, 1988). Khomeini's father, himself a religious leader, was murdered as a result of his struggle against oppressive landlords when Khomeini was only 5 months old. As a child, Khomeini witnessed the tyrannical and arbitrary rule of both governors and landlords. In 1918 he lost both his mother and aunt, finding

himself totally orphaned at the age of 16. A little bit later, Khomeini began to associate himself with religious institutions and the 'ulamá leadership and educational culture. He eventually became a teacher and started to write. As to political activism, Khomeini believed in spiritual preparation for external revolutions:

Once a man has become a true human being by means of spiritual discipline, he will be the most active of men. He will till the land, but he will till it for God's sake. He will also wage war, for all the wars waged against unbelievers and oppressors were waged by men absorbed in the contemplation of the divine unity and engaged in the constant invocation of God and the recitation of prayer. (Khomeini, cited in Algar, 1988, p. 271)

Khomeini's ideas responded directly to the needs and the emotional landscape of some segments of Iranian society. He attracted not only mullas and religious judges, but also all those who had reasons to perceive themselves as 'oppressed' and in need of a new ideology of healing.

Low religious diversity

In a country with already low religious diversity (Metz, 1989), a post-Islamic religion such as the Bahá'í faith (while in itself a tool for making sense of a society in change)

was perceived not only as a contradiction of Islamic logic; it also was perceived as a threat to the legitimacy of Khomeinism. It went counter to the interests and emotional needs of the Iranian mullas and their followers. Hence, Bahá'ís were declared heretics, deviants and destructive ideologists who ought to be exterminated. Doing so did not only help to get rid of a perceived threat; in addition, it also strengthened and consolidated 'ties of closeness' within the Shí'i faith community.

Criticisms of the Shah's modernization programs provided the Mullas with the political and socio-cultural justification to overthrow the Pahlavi regime. Mullas were particularly wary of the Shah's desire to lead Iran back to pre-Arab glory by means of a Western modernization program (Arndt, 1989). Although the Shah courted the clergy to maintain the political stability of the country, the clerical establishment and those educated by the mullas felt alienated and excluded.

Exclusive ideologies

Politically, the Pahlavi administration had always been an ideologically exclusionary organization. The purpose of SAVAK or the Resurgence Party was consolidation of power. As to the government that replaced the Pahlavi Dynasty, Milani (1997) argues that the Islamic revolution has incorporated, on the one hand, a larger segment of the population into the political process than had been the case under Mohammed Reza Shah. Yet, freedom is defined

as the permission to do whatever does not violate Islamic law. Therefore, while embracing fractional rivalry, it rejects the political participation of opponents (Milani, 1997, p. 78).

While seeking to create a system free of traditional dynasties and capable of enhancing the spiritual and socio-economic liberation of the oppressed, the current Iranian government nonetheless continues to propagate a political culture of authoritarianism. This time, however, it is based on an assertion of divine legitimacy for an Iranian Shí'i population socialized into subjugation to authority, communal identity, and acceptance of the clergy's claim of the divine right to lead. In this context, scapegoating anything that is perceived as a threat to the clergy's legitimacy becomes a political imperative.

Economic interconnectedness

Although the Shah's modernization programs resulted in increased economic exchange between Iran and the West, only a small business elite benefited from such relationships. Most left Iran soon after the revolution had begun, whereas members of the less-educated working and impoverished classes (the main supporters of the revolutionary agenda) remained in the country. Economic interconnectedness, then, had obviously not advanced to a point where an internationalization of Iranian economics could have prevented attempts to carry out actions of ideological genocide. At the same time, however, it is interesting to note that it is predominantly economic interests that continue to

drive efforts of the Iranian government to polish up its human rights image.

Education for preventing mass violence against minority groups

The systematic persecution of the Bahá'ís may have been prevented if Iran's population had been better informed about the Bahá'í teachings and the community of Iranians confessing to them. And, vice versa, persecutions might have been more severe if there hadn't been Iranians who despite all propaganda protected Bahá'ís – because *they knew better*.

This hypothesis that a lack of accessible information about the social and cultural tenets of minority groups may facilitate perpetrators' harmdoing against less-known 'outgroups' – while not addressed in Staub's (1989) or Harff, Gurr and Unger's (1999) frameworks – does appear to be of relevance when analyzing the circumstances that facilitated acts of violence against the Iranian Bahá'ís. In order to prevent politicide, it is necessary to strengthen the heterogeneity of national societies by incorporating faith concepts and values of minority cultures into academic curricula and discussions. Such a policy eventually must lead to a point where the existence of minorities and their right of a different voice can no longer be denied or minimized. As efforts to induce prejudice require a sophisticated rationale, a well-informed audience is less likely persuaded that a minority should be excluded from the 'moral universe' of society.

In Iran, mass violence against Bahá'ís did not only result from intrinsic emotional bewilderment of illiterate Iranians, but also due to the fact that Iranians learned about the Bahá'í Faith predominantly through the lens of its traditional 'ulamá leadership:

For the past century a curtain of silence has surrounded the subject. The Bahá'í community has at all times been denied the use of the usual means of communication with the general public: radio, television, newspapers, films, free distribution of literature, or public lectures. The academic community in Iran has entirely ignored the existence of the faith founded there; the subject is not treated in university courses or textbooks. Indeed, census figures which provided statistics on all of the other religious and ethnic minorities in Iran were omitted for the Bahá'í community, the largest religious minority of all. Coupled with this, the public mind has been subjected, for decades, to abusive propaganda from Shí'í Muslim clergy, in which the role of the Bahá'í community in Iran, its size, its beliefs, and its objectives have been misrepresented. (Martin, 1984, p. 23)

Efforts undertaken for preventing ideological genocide

Despite 25 years of silent persecution, the Iranian Bahá'í community remains the largest religious minority in Iran. The question that arises is why the Iranian authorities were so unsuccessful in suffocating and eradicating the Iranian Bahá'ís. There are a number of factors that may have helped Iranian Bahá'ís to persevere. Their study may be useful for developing a theory on how to cope with and survive attempts of ideological genocide.

Individual perseverance and community mobilization

First, it was the refusal of the Iranian Bahá'ís to recant their faith – despite promises of the Iranian authorities to reinstall pensions, return properties and halt psychological mistreatment of family members – that *stalled* an escalation of repressive maneuvers on the part of the government. Until 1992, less than 100 Bahá'ís had recanted their faith. Despite severe social and economic repression, Bahá'ís managed to mobilize their internal resources. Bahá'í entrepreneurs, despite removal of licenses and other repercussions, continued to run businesses, where Bahá'ís bought and were being employed. Doctors who had lost their licenses continued to practice privately and Bahá'ís sought treatment from Bahá'í medical experts. After having been barred from accessing universities, Bahá'ís established their own alternative system of higher education, where Bahá'í youth could pursue academic studies under the mentorship

of marginalized Bahá'í professionals (Stockman, 1999). These efforts, as well as Bahá'í spiritual attitudes towards persecution and suffering helped Bahá'ís to get by physically, mentally, and emotionally as well as spiritually (Stockman, 1999; Ghadirian, 1994).

Positive bystandership

Without the positive bystandership of Iranian Muslims who protected as well as helped and supported Bahá'ís, the Iranian Bahá'í community would have suffered more deeply. Tavakoli-Targhi (1999) cites examples of even 'ulamás risking their lives by shielding Bahá'í homes against the enraged mob, thereby demonstrating a new interpretation of Shí'i ethos. These ties of friendship were often rooted in the fact that Iranian Bahá'ís are also family members, neighbors, business partners, employers and employees, and overall well integrated in Iranian society. It is difficult for family members, business partners and neighbors to cut ties of friendship that have been woven during years and found to be rewarding in the past.

International advocacy

The most important outside influence that helped to deter mass persecutions were the interventions and demonstrations of sympathy of the international community. Since the inception of the Iranian revolution in 1979, the International Bahá'í Community has engaged in a broad set of

efforts to bring the case of the Iranian Bahá'ís to the attention of the United Nations, as well as national and local government representatives, human rights groups, the media and the general public. Bigelow (1992) believes that the outpouring of sympathy of the international community regarding the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran has been one of the key factors that restrained the Iranian government from engaging in a pogrom on a much larger scale.

On the international level, the United Nations General Assembly and the Commission on Human Rights called for the emancipation of the Iranian Bahá'í Community. That the perspective of the General Assembly matters to the Iranian government is demonstrated by the fact that the UN representative of the Iranian government has made several attempts between 1982 and 1984 to convince the UN diplomatic community that the Bahá'í Faith is a politicized organization with a record of criminal activism against the Iranian government. In 1985, Iran became the fourth country ever in the history of the United Nations to be placed on the agenda of the General Assembly because of the severity and the extent of its human rights violations record (Cooper, 1985).

In addition to the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament issued numerous resolutions. Also, individual heads of state publicly condemned the Iranian government's discrimination of the Bahá'ís in Iran. In the United States, congressional hearings about the human rights situation of Iranian Bahá'ís, as well as House and Senate Debates, took place in 1982, 1984, 1988,

1990, 1992, 1994, 1996 and 2000. The current pending resolution on the House side is H. Con. Res. 319, and on the Senate side S. Con. Res. 78.

In response, the Iranian government – through its respective embassies – sought to demonstrate to the public that Bahá'ís are being reprimanded not for practicing their religion, but due to criminal offenses. Iran obviously did not wish to be indicted on charges of human rights violations.⁴

The hypothesis that interlocking global realities of economic and political relationships can prevent perpetrators from carrying out acts of violence against other groups (Staub, 1989; Harff, Gurr and Unger, 1999) becomes particularly credible when analyzing the events that took place during a cabinet meeting in Iran in 1955. At this meeting, the government spokesman and the clergy pressed for a declaration that would have made the Bahá'í faith illegal. The meeting took place shortly after the Iranian government had been called by the United Nations and the United States Department of State to call a halt on attacks on Iranian Bahá'ís and Bahá'í property. As Akhavi (in Martin,

⁴ In 2002, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights opted – for the first time in 18 years – not to pass a resolution expressing concern about human rights in Iran, and to instead engage Iran into a ‘dialogue’ on human rights. Yet, in the estimation of Bahá'í representatives, the situation of the Iranian Bahá'ís subsequently deteriorated, “... with an increase in short term arrests and detentions, the confiscation of more properties, and continued harassment of Bahá'í teachers and students” (Dugal, in Bahá'í World News Service, 2003, p. 1).

On 21 November 2003, the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly approved a new resolution that expresses serious concern over continuing violations of human rights in Iran, and continuing discrimination against Bahá'ís and other religious minorities.

1984) illustrates, the intervention of the United Nations forced government officials to refrain from passing an already agreed-upon law proposed by the clergy to make the Bahá'í Faith illegal:

The clergy pressed for a formal piece of legislation which would declare the Bahá'í Faith illegal, would make service to the faith a criminal offense, and would establish appropriate penalties: prison terms for anyone guilty of Bahá'í membership, the sequestration of all Bahá'í properties and the disbursement of the proceeds for the use of Islamic propaganda agencies, the discharge of all Bahá'ís from public service, and the prohibition of any form of Bahá'í religious activity. The clergy's spokesmen in the Majlis found themselves facing an embarrassed cabinet which, while assuring them that every means would be taken "within the law" to protect Islam, stubbornly refused to introduce the legislation which would have accomplished the 'ulamás' objectives. Nor would the government even pronounce its official attitude towards the Bahá'í Faith. The regime was reduced to engaging in a debate in the Majlis on the subject of the Bahá'í community, in which the government apologists appear to have been

forbidden to mention the word Bahá'í. (Martin, 1984, p. 22-23)

The media as a tool to denounce human rights violations

In the United States, the American Bahá'í Community eventually decided to hire a public relations firm in order to launch a campaign for raising awareness about the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran, and for winning the attention of individuals and offices with a reputation in human rights activities. Once Bahá'ís were invited to testify at hearings on religious persecution, the same public relations company assisted the Bahá'ís in the planning of presentation strategies to be used during the hearings, and in the analysis of the resolutions that were drafted in order to determine further actions (Bigelow, 1992).

With the encouragement of the Bahá'í International Community Offices at the United Nations in New York and Geneva, Bahá'í communities in many different parts of the world began to forward information about the Bahá'í persecution in Iran to local newspapers. In the United States alone, 1700 local Bahá'í Assemblies began write to representatives at Congress, thereby forming a grassroots constituency of American Bahá'ís (Bigelow, 1992, pp. 193-194). Bahá'í college clubs were advised to inform university chancellors and academic department heads about the closing and raiding of the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Learning (BIHE) in August 1998 (Bronner, 1998). University authorities wrote letters of protest, thereby reminding the

Iranian authorities that the world was aware of the Bahá'í situation in Iran (Stockman, 1999). In Canada, North American Bahá'í artists as well as Iranian Bahá'í refugees recreated the story of Mona Mahmúdnizhád, the teenage girl who was hanged in Shiraz in 1983, by producing a music video (Charters, Frame, Lenz and Akhavan, 1984). The video was later distributed in Canadian pubs, youth clubs and discotheques and proved to be remarkably effective in bringing the human rights situation in Iran to the attention of the public.

Conclusion

Bahá'ís in Iran share a fate similar to that of European Jews who had been demonized by Christians as enemies of God; Argentinean communists who had been devalued by the military; or urban Cambodian intellectuals who had been accused of impeding the liberation of the Cambodian proletariat. Although the only non-Muslim religious community in the world that actually bears witness to the authenticity of the Religion of Islam, Bahá'ís are viewed as enemies of Islam, and as ideological heretics who challenge the fulfillment of a cherished Shí'i religious vision.

The Iranian Bahá'ís also illustrate how a community, its social support networks, as well as the international human rights machinery can work together to prevent perpetrators from engaging in ideological genocide.

Today, Bahá'ís born in 1978 have become adults without an experience of what it means to live a life free of

accusations of being enemies of the Iranian government and of Islam. Iranian Bahá'ís continue to live in the fear that recent executions, killings, and other forms of persecution may intensify again at any time. Unless the Iranian leadership seeks to view the Bahá'í community as a genuinely Iranian intellectual and religious movement (Tavakoli-Targhi, 1999, p. 1) that has actually evolved in the context of Iranian culture and is now established on a global scale, not much will change for the Iranian Bahá'ís. Ideological genocide continues to loom on the horizon, and it will take continued international efforts to persuade Iranian authorities to prevent further violence against the Bahá'ís of Iran.

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Appendix A

Golpaygani Memorandum

A translation of The Golpaygani Memorandum – the official “blueprint” for the destruction of the Bahá’í community, made public by the UN representative for Iran, Mr. Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, in 1993 (cited in Bahá’í International Community, 1999, pp. 50-51).

[Translation from Persian]

[Texts in square brackets added by translator]

In the Name of God!

The Islamic Republic of Iran

The Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council

Number: 1327/....

Date: 6/12/69 [25 February 1991]

Enclosure: None

CONFIDENTIAL

Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Golpaygani

Head of the Office of the Esteemed Leader [Khamenei]

Greetings!

After greetings with reference to the letter #1/783 dated 10/10/69 [31 December 1990], concerning the instructions of

the Esteemed Leader which had been conveyed to the Respected President regarding the Baha'i question, we inform you that, since the respected President and the Head of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council had referred this question to this Council for consideration and study, it was placed on the Council's agenda of session #128 on 16/11/69 [5 February 1991] and session #119 of 2/11/69 [22 January 1991]. In addition to the above, and further to the [results of the] discussion held in this regard in session #112 of 2/5/66 [24 July 1987] presided over the Esteemed Leader (head and member of the Supreme Council), the recent views and directives given by the Esteemed Leader regarding the Baha'i question were conveyed to the Supreme Council. In consideration with the contents of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as the religious and civil laws and general policies of the country, these matters were carefully studied and decisions pronounced.

In arriving at the decisions and proposing reasonable ways to counter the above question, due consideration was given to the wishes of the Esteemed Leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran [Khamenei], namely, that "in this regard a specific policy should be devised in such a way that everyone will understand what should or should not be done". Consequently, the following proposals and recommendations resulted from these discussions.

The respected President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as the Head of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, while approving these recommendations,

instructed us to convey them to the Esteemed Leader [Khamenei] so that appropriate action may be taken according to his guidance.

SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS OF THE DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

A. General status of the Bahá'ís within the country's system

1. They will not be expelled from the country without reason.
2. They will not be arrested, imprisoned, or penalized without reason.
3. The Government's dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked.

B. Educational and cultural status

1. They can be enrolled in schools provided they have not identified themselves as Bahá'ís.
2. Preferably they should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing religious ideology.
3. They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Bahá'ís.
4. Their political (espionage) activities must be dealt with according appropriate Government laws and policies, and their religious and propaganda activities should be answered by giving them religious and cultural responses, as well as propaganda.
5. Propaganda institutions (such as the Islamic Propaganda Organization) must establish an independent section to counter the propaganda and religious activities of the Bahá'ís.

6. A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country.
- C. Legal and social status
1. Permit them a modest livelihood as is available to the general population.
 2. To the extent that it does not encourage them to be Bahá'ís, it is permissible to provide them the means for ordinary living in accordance with the general rights given to every ordinary citizen such as ration booklets, passports, burial certificates, work permits, etc.
 3. Deny them employment if they identify themselves as Bahá'ís.
 4. Deny them any position of influence, such as it is in the educational sector, etc.

Wishing you divine confirmations,

Secretary of the Supreme Revolutionary Council

Dr. Seyyed Mohammed Golpaygani [Signature]

[Note in the handwriting of Mr. Khamenei]

In the Name of God!

The decision of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council seems sufficient. I thank you gentleman for your attention and efforts

[signed:] Ali Khamenei

