

Iran is the cradle of the Bahá'í Faith, but for Iran the Bahá'ís are not allowed to exist. The policy is directed at their elimination, according to Loes Bijnen

## Iran slowly strangles the Bahá'í believer

Hidden behind the persecution of the Iranian political opposition the Bahá'ís are being mercilessly oppressed. At least sixty followers of the Bahá'í Faith are languishing behind bars in solitary confinement. Their leaders, the “seven friends” or “Yaran” have been in prison since the spring of 2008. On 12 April the court case against them will be resumed. Nearly on a daily basis –unnoticed by the world press – Bahá'ís are being arrested straight from their beds.

As far as Iran is concerned Bahá'ís should not exist. Official Iranian policy is aimed at their elimination. In the nineteenth century and again after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 this was done purely by execution, nowadays by slowly strangling this religious community.

Iran is the cradle of the Bahá'í Faith. In 1844 a man stood up: the ‘Bab’ (the Gate), who announced that he was the Hidden Imam and that the “Promised One of All Ages” would soon come. In 1863 a highly educated Persian born in an aristocratic family, Bahá'u'lláh, made known that the time had indeed come and that he had been called to found a world religion in which all other religions would be welcome: a religion of peace, equality of all cultures and human races, but also of equality between men and women, and of the gathering of knowledge at the service of the whole of mankind.

For Muslims Mohammed is the last prophet. The seal. A new prophet is excluded, unthinkable. A merciless persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran followed. Tens of thousands of followers of Bahá'u'lláh were executed. Yet in spite of the oppression the Bahá'í community kept growing, in Iran as well as worldwide.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979 which ousted the Shah and brought Ayatollah Khomeini back to Iran, a wave of summary executions started, not only of supporters of the exiled monarch and members of the Imperial Guard but equally of the leaders of opposition groups that had warmly welcomed Khomeini upon his return. In the early eighties communists, socialists, members of the Mojaheddin-e Khalq, university professors and students became victims of the new executioners. In spite of the fact that they were not allowed to interfere in politics and were always law-abiding, the Bahá'ís did not escape the wrath of the clerical rulers. During the first years of the new regime at least two hundred of them were murdered.

Article 13 of the Iranian constitution stipulates that only Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians are recognized as religious minorities. Not the Bahá'ís, the largest religious minority with an estimate of 300.000 followers. The Iranian authorities view them as apostates and even as conspirators who plot to bring down the ayatollahs. Bahá'ís are a group without rights, unprotected, outlawed.

**[Subtitle in the article : “Holy places are being razed to the ground”]**

In 1993 a rapporteur from the UN Commission on Human Rights, Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, during a visit to Iran discovered an official memorandum dating back to 1991 and published it. This co-called “Golpayegani Memorandum”, co-signed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei,

was a blueprint for the strangulation of the Bahá'í community. Here are some stipulations from the memorandum:

- Children can only be registered at schools on the condition that they have not been identified as Bahá'ís;
- These children should preferably be registered at schools that are known for their strict and penetrative religious ideology;
- Youngsters must be removed from universities, either during the process of registering or during the school year as soon as it becomes clear that they are followers of the Bahá'í Faith;
- Political activities by the Bahá'ís must be restrained according to the laws in force and the government's policy on the subject;
- A plan has to be drafted to fight and to destroy their cultural roots abroad;
- Deny them the right to work when they make themselves known as Bahá'ís;
- Deny them any influential position, for example in the academic world etc.

**This is official policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran.**

But long before the publishing of this Memorandum, students known to be Bahá'ís were removed from high schools and universities. Their usually highly educated parents had begun to teach their children at home. In 1987 the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) had been founded. This “Bahá'í University”, accommodated in private houses and buildings, was a resounding success. A few years after its foundation an average of nine hundred students were registered at the BIHE with hundred fifty Bahá'í academics to teach them (often without pay). However, in 1998 at the start of the new school year, agents of secret services raided at least five hundred houses and buildings where the BIHE was active and confiscated books, computers and other study material.

The BIHE has nearly been destroyed. As said before, the complete Bahá'í leadership in Iran, the “Yaran”, is behind bars since the spring of 2008 and is being brought before hardline judges in show trials. Some of the many fake accusations against the seven are:

- Espionage for Israel (“spying for the Zionist entity”);
- Propaganda against Islamic sanctities;
- Foundation of an illegal organisation;
- Sending of secret documents abroad;
- Undermining the security in the country;
- ‘Corruption on earth’ (which can carry the death penalty).

The international Bahá'í community has rejected the accusations.

At least sixty bahá'ís are in prison at the moment and ninety others are awaiting their court case at home. Bahá'í cemeteries, mausoleums and other holy sites and buildings are desecrated and being razed to the ground. The demolishing of holy places is also part of the regime's scheme to systematically strangle this religious community.

I totally agree with the following quotation which I found on the internet: “The hatred of the extremist mullahs for the Bahá'ís is so intense that, after the example of the Taliban in Afghanistan, who destroyed the immense Buddha statues in Bamiyan, they have the intention to wipe out not only the Bahá'í religion itself but even all traces of its existence in the country of its birth.”

Loes Bijnen  
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