A Quiet Exodus

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1. Introduction, from Bahá'í News Canada (2013-08-06)

The Literary Review of Canada, the country’s "leading forum for discussion and debate about books, culture, politics and ideas," has published a new essay on the migration of Baha’i refugees to Canada in the 1980s.

This is the first time a major Canadian publication has carried an article that tells the story of cooperation between the Baha’i community and the Canadian government to resettle about 2,300 refugees at the height of the persecutions in Iran. Most of these Baha’i refugees were stranded outside of Iran without valid travel documents. They were sponsored by some 220 local communities across the country, and Canada’s refugee program helped to open the doors to the resettlement of about 6,000 more Baha’is in 25 countries around the world between 1981 and 1989.

The article, written by Geoffrey Cameron, Principal Researcher with the Baha’i Community of Canada, draws from interviews with a number of current and former government officials, including former Minister of Employment and Immigration Lloyd Axworthy, several Baha’is involved with the program, and archival materials and correspondence. Many of the government officials who worked on the program described it as one of the highlights of their careers, because of the trust and cooperation fostered between Baha’i representatives and the Government of Canada in response to a pressing humanitarian situation.

The "special measures" program, which expedited Baha’i applications for resettlement, ended in 1989.

2. A Quiet Exodus, from Literary Review of Canada (2013-07-01)

Welcoming Bahá'í refugees from Iran was a humanitarian landmark — and an enduring immigration lesson.

In 1973, the Trudeau government decided that Canada’s immigration and refugee policies were outdated and in need of revision. Canada’s response to a series

of refugee situations—the Czechs in 1968, Asian Ugandans in 1972 and Chileans in 1973—had each required the creation of new regulations, and it was clear that a more general framework was needed to allow for a more flexible and nimble response to humanitarian crises. A series of government-led national dialogues on immigration were held, culminating in the passage of the Immigration Act in 1976, and its implementation two years later.

The act made a number of important changes to refugee policy. The most important included the principle of admission to Canada on humanitarian grounds and a provision for private sponsorship of refugees (which had previously been an ad hoc arrangement with each refugee situation). The act was almost immediately tested by the "Boat People" crisis of 1979–80, during which close to 60,000 Indochinese (Vietnamese) refugees were resettled in Canada—more than half of them privately sponsored.

While the Indochinese program has been widely discussed and analyzed, it was followed by another, smaller refugee movement to Canada that has received scant attention from scholars or journalists. The Iranian Baha'i refugee program ran from 1981 to 1989, blending private sponsorship and government-assisted resettlement, in a unique model of partnership between government and civil society. Around 2,300 refugees were resettled in about 220 communities across Canada, and Canada's program was used as a model to open doors to resettlement for some 6,000 more Baha'i refugees in 25 countries around the world. At a time when private sponsorship and civil society partnerships are a focus of changes to refugee law and policy, the Baha'i program offers lessons from an early case of private sponsorship.

The Threat of Genocide

The Baha'i minority of Iran was targeted by ascendant Islamic hardliners in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution. Baha'is were the clearest obstacle to ideological unity in the clerics' project to fuse the state with a radical version of Shi'a Islam. Iran's clerical elite had a particular animus towards the Baha'is, the country's largest religious minority and followers of a post-Islamic religion— heretics, in their eyes.

The Baha'i faith has its origins in mid 19th-century Persia. Baha'u'llah, its prophet-founder, spent most of his life as a prisoner and exile, eventually passing away under house arrest near Ottoman Akka (now in Israel). The Baha'i faith is an independent world religion that espouses the oneness of humankind and a vision of society that is both spiritually and materially prosperous. Its followers in Iran have experienced persecution since the inception of the religion.

Following the revolution, the early attacks on the Baha'is included more than 200 executions and "disappearances," which appeared to be coordinated to eliminate those in visible leadership positions in the community. Baha'i graveyards and holy sites were razed, children and youth were ejected from schools, properties were seized and virtually all citizenship rights were stripped from Baha'is. Baha'is were banned from leaving the country, just

as the nascent regime was in the midst of terrorizing the community. Writing in the New York Review of Books in 1982, Firuz Kazemzadeh raised an alarm: “the threat of genocide hangs over the heads of the Baha’is of Iran.”

Canada was a leading voice in the international outcry against the attacks on Baha’is. In June 1980, Canada’s House of Commons was the first legislature to pass a resolution (unanimously) calling attention to the situation of the Baha’is in Iran. The government brought a resolution to the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination Against Minorities, initiating a series of interventions by the UN Commission on Human Rights. Canada matched its diplomatic words with protective action—its special resettlement program for Baha’i refugees was the first dedicated effort to extend international protection to Baha’is fleeing violence in Iran.

Making It Happen

The Baha’i Community of Canada approached the government in 1981 to seek its assistance in resettling stateless Baha’i refugees. Lloyd Axworthy, Canada’s future foreign minister, had just been named minister of employment and immigration, and the case of the Baha’is was one of the first he encountered. Axworthy’s response was influenced by two factors. The first was an earlier approach by his constituents to support the June 1980 House of Commons motion condemning attacks on Iranian Baha’is. He was familiar with the Baha’i case and was convinced of its seriousness and urgency. The second was the availability of a policy framework for private sponsorship, which had been tried and tested in the case of the Indochinese resettlement program.

Canada bypassed the lengthy procedure of determining refugee status through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and encouraged its officers to grant refugee status to Iranian Baha’is, provided they could verify their status as Baha’i. For this, refugees relied upon official letters of support from the Baha’i Community of Canada. Two categories of refugees were identified for resettlement in Canada: those living outside of Iran, who faced difficulty renewing their passports as Baha’is, and those who had fled to nearby countries and were in particularly vulnerable situations. Those who met these criteria would be granted refugee status and visas in Canada, and they would be transported, settled and socially integrated by the Baha’i community itself.

As early as December 1981, Canada’s Department of Employment and Immigration included an appendix to its immigration manual providing visa officers with special directions regarding refugee applications made by Iranian Baha’is. They were to be “reviewed as sympathetically as possible with a view to approval by the use of positive discretion wherever reasonable.” Cases that could not be approved would “require Ministerial concurrence in refusal.”

Despite the clear policy direction from Ottawa, there was initially some inconsistency and lengthy delays with processing Baha’i refugee applications. Gerry Van Kessel, a manager in the refugee branch, recalls: “One of our challenges at the beginning was that … there was very limited recognition [of

the Baha'i faith] at that time … The posts abroad were very suspicious of what [headquarters was] trying to do." Indeed, headquarters did not have the authority to direct officers to approve specific cases, and some officers resisted the approach of the Baha'i program. Because field-level officers exercised a high degree of discretion in evaluating refugee applications, Baha'i applications were not always treated with the flexibility that was intended by Ottawa.

In response to this growing problem, the ministry helped to train two staff of the Baha'i community in its immigration procedures. Mona Mojgani and Carolyn Dowdell began to undertake visits to Canadian missions with a view to acquainting foreign service officers with the situation of the Iranian Baha'is and to affirm the policy direction coming from Ottawa. This strategy expedited processing in the early phase of the program, just when the violence in Iran was intensifying further and more Baha'is were fleeing the country, often on foot under extremely dangerous circumstances. Pakistan and Turkey were emerging as primary destinations for these refugees.

When Mojgani arrived at the Canadian High Commission in Islamabad for the first time, she encountered a frustrated Dennis Scown, the immigration program manager, who was only five weeks into his posting and already irritated by the cumbersome procedures established for processing Baha'i cases. In her meeting notes she recorded him saying, "I think all these cases have been blown up, and none [of them is] urgent." Anyway, he said to Mojgani, they would be stuck in Pakistan for at least a year—that was how long it would take to process their applications. Mojgani spent most of the day listening to the problems with processing Baha'i refugees and discussing practical solutions with Scown.

Despite his initial reluctance, Scown would forge a warm and productive partnership with Mojgani. At his suggestion, she first facilitated the relocation of scattered Baha'i refugees to Islamabad, and she spent up to 20 hours a day preparing them for their interviews, getting their paperwork in order and prescreening candidates who met Canada's resettlement preferences. With Mojgani's help, Scown lowered the waiting time for refugees from one year to two weeks. Soon, he recommended doubling the quota of Baha'i refugees, and then offered to do it again. When Ottawa telexed Scown in February 1985 to ask for a status report on Baha'i refugee processing out of Islamabad, he replied on the same day:

Post has gone and will continue to go out of its way to facilitate processing of Bahais. In fact, in past eighteen months have had quota for govt sponsored Bahais raised from fifty to one hundred fifty per year … Virtually all Bahai cases are interviewed within two wks of applying … At present we have no/no cases awaiting interview and have informed Bahais wud welcome more applications from suitable candidates.

Mojgani continued to nurture friendships with immigration officers at Canadian and other foreign missions in a number of countries. However, the relationship

with Scown was special. He became so impressed with the Baha'is that he began to advocate their case to his colleagues from other countries. He urged his Australian and American colleagues to resettle Baha'is, at a time when their governments were reluctant to do so. An experienced officer with years of field experience, Scown was accustomed to deception and manipulation by those who wanted a way into Canada. But with Mojgani, he said, "there was no BS—she gave you the straight goods … and once I got to know the [refugees], they sold themselves."

Trust and credibility are the currency of cooperation, and this lesson was borne out in the field as well as at headquarters. At a meeting between Baha'i representatives and the principals at the Departments of External Affairs and Immigration, the spokesperson for immigration declared, "the Baha'is are the only group whom we have never been burned by. [They are] as concerned about the welfare of this country as they are about their own people."

Douglas Martin, secretary general of the Baha'i community, fostered the relationship with headquarters. Martin worked with Gerry Van Kessel and Kirk Bell, director general of policy at the immigration ministry, to develop the private sponsorship policy framework and to maintain a flow of information about the dynamic situation in Iran. In 1983, Bell approached Martin about increasing the resettlement quota for Baha'is, whose quick social and economic integration into Canadian society had impressed officials. While the quota had already been increased several times (which itself was remarkable, in the context of an overall drastic reduction in refugee resettlement quotas during the 1980s), Bell suggested something different: Canada would include Baha'is who lacked financial means in a new government-assisted refugee program, and those with more resources would move through the private sponsorship system. The Baha'i community would still manage resettlement coordination.

During the 1980s, the greater part of Canada's Middle East refugee allocation was made available for the resettlement of Baha'is from Iran. The Canadian preference for resettling Baha'i refugees did not go unnoticed. A Canadian student who was visiting Pakistan became frustrated that Canada was not resettling more Afghans—who, according to UNHCR assessments, enjoyed a relatively secure position in Pakistan. She perceived the Canadian preference for Baha'is to be at the expense of the family she sought to sponsor.

The student wrote to her member of Parliament, David Kilgour, the parliamentary secretary to the foreign minister, complaining about the "prejudices" of Mark Davidson (then a visa officer, now a senior official at Citizenship and Immigration Canada) in Islamabad: "Even [his] body language and expressions indicated his biases … I could not help but get the idea this man was on some kind of crusade for the B'Hai [sic], at the expense of the Afghans." Kilgour forwarded the complaint to Joe Clark, the foreign minister, who came to Davidson's defence in writing, citing reports from the UNHCR that discouraged large-scale resettlement of Afghanis and stressed the vulnerability of

minorities from Iran. Clark noted that far from expressing his personal bias, Davidson “was following a policy established by the government.”

That the program did not attract more attention was in all likelihood a function of the quiet way in which it was carried out, with no effort made to attract publicity by either the government or the Baha’is—primarily to avoid inadvertently inflaming the situation further in Iran, at a time when Canada was applying pressure on the Islamic Republic to stop persecuting Baha’is.

Coming to Canada

As private sponsors, the Baha’i community took responsibility for many aspects of resettlement in Canada. The Iranian Baha’i Refugee Office was established in Toronto to coordinate the movement of refugees to Canada and, later, to other countries that established quotas for Baha’is.

One particularly notable aspect of the resettlement process is the broad distribution of refugees across the country and the avoidance of major urban centres for settlement. While the Baha’i community in Canada was intensely aware of the humanitarian nature of their support to Iranian co-religionists, they also saw them as contributing members of their growing communities.

The response of communities across the country led to the resettlement of refugees in about 220 cities and towns—including the North and on islands at both coasts. When a group of refugees arrived in Canada, they would typically stay in an urban centre for less than 48 hours before departing for their final destination, a policy adopted by the Baha’i community in order to promote local integration. A report prepared by the Baha’i Refugee Office made particular note of the reciprocal dynamic of the integration process:

We have found that when the refugee is not surrounded by an entire community of her own cultural group, she is much more likely to quickly learn the language and customs of her new country. If the Canadians befriending her are sensitive and eager to learn, this does not by any means necessitate her losing her own cultural identity. On the contrary, it provides for a wonderful enrichment of all concerned.

The strategy was also successful in terms of socioeconomic integration for the refugees. A government memo recorded the following: “the employment record of Baha’i refugees is very impressive. More than 90% find jobs within the first year in Canada—the majority beginning work in the first six months.”

Around 1984, the resettlement program broadened its scope to focus on opening other countries to Baha’i refugees. While declining offers from the Canadian government to increase its resettlement quota any further, the Baha’i Refugee Office oversaw a series of visits by Mona Mojgani to dozens of countries where she met with senior officials to acquaint them with the situation in Iran, share the success of the Canadian program and urge them to make an allowance for Baha’i refugees. Countries such as Brazil and Ireland, which routinely resisted the entreaties of the UNHCR to admit refugees, acceded to Mojgani—in

part due to the achievements of Canada's program.

By 1989, some 8,000 refugees had been resettled in about 25 countries. Canada took about 2,300 of these people, but its policy leadership opened the way for thousands of the others to settle in countries ranging from Uruguay to Luxembourg. By 1990, the situation in Iran had changed; while Baha'is were still denied most basic rights, the arbitrary imprisonment and violent persecution had mostly stopped. The desperate traffic across borders had slowed significantly. As a consequence, the Baha'i community dissolved its resettlement agency, and cases were henceforward handled on an individual basis.

The Baha'i community has fortunately not had to resort to a mass refugee resettlement program since 1989. However, the human rights situation in Iran is deteriorating once again, indicated by a rising tide of arbitrary arrests and symbolized by the unjustified imprisonment of the Baha'i community leadership in 2008 and their sentence to 20 years in prison (longer than any prisoner of conscience). In May 2013, four UN experts on Iran, minorities, arbitrary detention and religious freedom issued a joint statement condemning Iran's persecution of its Baha'i minority, and calling for the release of its imprisoned leaders.

The Future of Private Sponsorship

In Rethinking Asylum, Matthew E. Price frames debates about asylum policy according to two rival justifications: political action and humanitarian response. The first view sees resettlement as a tool of foreign policy, or a way in which one government can express its condemnation of the actions of another and pressure it to conform to human rights norms. The second perspective sees asylum as politically neutral, or something that should be offered to any individual in need of protection against any form of persecution. According to Price, this approach treats asylum as a "palliative" response that ignores the political problem at its root. It has also become a more common way of framing refugee policy.

Price makes a compelling case for restoring a political approach to asylum, but his framework takes a restricted view of states as the only agents of refugee resettlement. The main advocates for a broader humanitarian basis for asylum have been civil society organizations, however—not states. Indeed, the private sponsorship system introduced by Canada in the late 1970s was largely a response to pressure from civil society (primarily churches) to be allowed to "do something" in response to a series of international crises. The private sponsorship system opened the door to a new level of civil society involvement with and responsibility for resettlement, and to date more than 200,000 people have moved to Canada through this policy channel.

While the Baha'i community shouldered most of the responsibility for resettlement of Iranian Baha'is in Canada, the government employed bilateral and multilateral political pressure on Iran to stop the persecution. Private sponsorship allowed both humanitarian and political justifications to operate

simultaneously within refugee policy. The program was scaled down by 1990 as a response to changing events on the ground in Iran—a mild improvement to which international pressure undoubtedly contributed.

The Baha'i program demonstrates the value of policy coherence between the political and humanitarian dimensions of refugee resettlement—or, in more contemporary language, taking a "whole-of-government approach" to state-sponsored persecutions of groups. A strictly humanitarian approach to refugee policy, in which sponsorship is entirely disconnected from foreign policy, would indeed be palliative, since the actions of states are needed to hold the offending sovereign to account.

However, a cautionary note is required. Restoring a stronger political dimension to refugee policy should not come at the expense of the initiative of sponsoring organizations. One of the primary reasons for the success of the Baha'i program was the degree of responsibility given to the Canadian community for the selection and resettlement process. Its institutions and members were highly invested in the program as a result, and the impressive socioeconomic outcomes of the program are a testament to the benefits reaped by the refugees themselves as a result of these -relationships.

It can be tempting for government to view civil society organizations as potential vehicles for service delivery at the grassroots. Acting on such a view of private sponsorship, however, would allow political imperatives to overwhelm the expressions of solidarity from the Canadian public that give rise to sponsorship in the first place.

Canada has made a number of recent changes to private sponsorship aimed at improving the efficiency of the program. The number of "named" sponsorships a group can make has been capped—for example, when sponsors name the members of the extended family of a refugee already settled in Canada. Private sponsors were previously allowed to name an unlimited number of individuals for resettlement, each of whom would be interviewed to evaluate their refugees status. This process generated a backlog and a relatively high number of rejected applications. The inefficiencies held up other urgent asylum applications.

While taking steps to decrease named sponsorships, the government is moving toward a system of preselecting eligible refugees for "unnamed" private sponsorship. It has made it easier and faster to sponsor individuals who have already been recognized as refugees, either through Canadian visa office referrals or via formal registration with the UNHCR. A "public policy" category also allows the minister to identify members of specific groups for expedited resettlement through private sponsorship; these groups currently include Tibetans living in India and Iraqi Christians.

Despite the obvious merits of changes that make private sponsorship more efficient, the direction of reform has been toward increasing government control and away from civil society initiative. Private sponsorship increasingly resembles the government-assisted refugee program, but with civic

groups footing the bill.

The essential value of the private sponsorship program is that it allows solidarity groups, religious communities and diaspora organizations to complement the government-assisted refugee program with grassroots humanitarian action. While altruism is part of the motivation for private sponsors, their action often arises from a feeling of connection with a particular persecuted group—whether because of a common homeland, religious affiliation or a certain kind of persecution. A private sponsorship program that closes the space for groups to identify refugees for resettlement may undermine the basis of its long-term viability.

Asylum policy presents a tension between government imperatives and the humanitarian goals of civic groups. This tension has been managed productively in many cases in the past, and there are plenty of models from which to learn. The Indochinese case offered a model of matching the numbers of government-assisted refugees with privately sponsored refugees, one way to incentivize sponsorship without directing or controlling it. The Baha'i case offers another model, one of tight coordination and trust building between a religious community and the Canadian government. By looking back to the origins of private sponsorship we may be able to uncover other lessons that will help to maintain the vitality of this essential resettlement policy. The beneficiaries will not only be the stateless and vulnerable refugees who find new homes in Canada, but also the citizens who choose to act on principles of hospitality, generosity and solidarity with others.

About the author: Geoffrey Cameron is principal researcher with the Bahá'í Community of Canada, and a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto. He is the co-author of Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped Our World and Will Define Our Future (Princeton University Press, 2011), with Ian Goldin and Meera Balarajan.

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