Baha'i Persecutions

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Bahai persecutions were a pattern of continuing discriminatory measures against adherents and institutions of the Bahai religion, punctuated by outbreaks of both random and organized violence against individuals and property. Although Bahai accounts conflate earlier episodes involving Babis with those concerned with Bahais in the proper sense, there are good grounds for avoiding this approach in analyzing what are really quite distinct phenomena. At the same time, it is worth observing that much of the original animus against Bahais was rooted in fears roused by Babi militancy between 1848 and 1853.

Persecution in the late 19th and 20th centuries was ostensibly motivated and justified by religious considerations, whereas in recent decades anti-Bahai polemic has become heavily politicized, even under the Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, social and economic factors cannot be discounted in the earlier period any more than simple religious prejudice in the later. The earliest anti-Bahai activities were essentially continuations of previous attacks on Babis and took the form of isolated beatings, expulsions, lootings, or killings; such incidents were almost always initiated by individual ?olama? or local government officials for whom they were expedient. From the 1920s, however, physical attacks gave way on the whole to general civil and religious discrimination, representing a broader consensus of anti-Bahai feeling at all levels of society. Even then, the potential for actual violence was never far beneath the surface, as demonstrated by the events of 1955 and the 1980s.

The main accusations leveled against the Bahais may be found in the extensive anti-Bahai polemical literature published in Iran since the last century (see the bibliography). Religiously, Bahais are considered koffar (unbelievers) in that they claim a book and prophet chronologically posterior to the Koran and Mohammad, regard the Islamic šari?a (canonical law) as abrogated and replaced by that of their own faith, and seek to convert Muslims to their beliefs. More recently, however, it has become customary to condemn Bahaism precisely because it is “not a religion” but a political movement working in conjunction with royalist, Zionist, American, British, or other agencies for the subversion of Islam and the Iranian nation. It is perhaps worth placing on record here that no convincing evidence has ever been presented for Bahai involvement with British, Israeli, or American intelligence or with SAVAK (the state security agency): the real reasons for Bahai unpopularity must be sought on deeper social and psychological levels.

Among incidents in the Qajar period, the following may be noted: the execution of three Bahais in Tabriz in 1283/1867, following the murder of an Azali Babi by one of the accused; several outbreaks of trouble in the Isfahan region, including a wave of arrests in 1291/1874, the executions of two wealthy Bahai merchants in 1296/1879, and mass expulsions in Najafabad and Sedeh in 1306/1889—in these and other incidents, major roles were played by Shaikh Mohammad-Baqer Esfahani, his son Shaikh Mohammad-Taqi (Aqa Najafi), Mir Sayyed Mohammad, the emam-e jom?a of Isfahan, and Soltan-Mas?ud Mirza Zell-al-Soltan; the arrest of some 50 Bahais, including several leaders of the movement, in Tehran in 1300/1883; the murder of 5 Bahais in Torbat-e Haydari in 1314/1896; the murder of Haji Mohammad Tabrizi in Mašhad in 1315/1898, leading to a prolonged wrangle between the prime minister (Amin-al-Dawla) and the authorities in Mašhad; further disturbances in Najafabad in 1316-17/1897, involving a bast (seeking the protection of an inviolate location) of some 300 people at the British telegraph office; the execution of 7 Bahais in Yazd in 1308/1901, on the orders of Soltan-Hosayn Mirza Jalal-al-Dawla; and a series of disturbances in 1321/1903, in Rašt, Isfahan (where 3 Bahais were killed and some 4,000 sought bast in the Russian consulate), and Yazd (where about 100 Bahais were put to death). (For details of these and other incidents, see in particular Momen, Babí and Bahá?í Religions; Nicolas, Massacres; Browne, Materials, chap. 7; Shoghi Effendi, God Passes By, pp. 198-203, 296-99.)

In the course of these and other outrages against Bahais, frequent representations were made to the Iranian government by the British and Russian legations, but at no time were serious measures taken to proceed against the guilty parties or to prevent further outbreaks. The Bahai incidents may thus be considered as particular foci for foreign concern about issues of civil liberties and the enforcement of law and order in Iran at this period.

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During the period of the Constitutional Revolution, both royalists and constitutionalists were accused by their opponents of being “Babis,” usually without any distinctions between Azalis and Bahais. Although the Bahais claimed to be neutral and did not, for the most part, engage in overt political activity, this was not always clear to the general public. Their Azali rivals, with whom they were frequently confused, certainly did number among their ranks several prominent reformers. At the same time, the Bahais were well represented in court and government circles, and writings of the Bahai leadership of the period express support for the shah and disapproval of constitutionalist activities (see MacEoin, “Religious Heterodoxy;” Roemer, Babi-Beha?i, pp. 153-60). Although direct attacks on Bahais at this time were limited, it seems certain that the sect's long-term failure to win the sympathy of anti-traditionalist elements in Iranian society dates from this period.

In the Pahlavi era, anti-Bahai feeling entered a new phase. From about 1342/1926, "the moves against the Baha'is assumed a more subtle, pseudo-legal nature" (Momen, Bábí and Bahá?í Religions, p. 462). A pogrom in Jahrom in that year, which was instigated for political motives by Esma?il Khan Sawlat-al-Dawla and in which eight individuals died, was to be the last outbreak on that scale until 1955. A major factor in the decline of violent attacks was undoubtedly the weakness of the ?olama? under Reza Shah, but this did not prevent discrimination against Bahais taking other forms. Denied official recognition in the 1906 Constitution or subsequent legislation, the Bahais were unable to secure basic rights as a religious community on a par with those accorded to Jews, Christians, or Zoroastrians, whose civil recognition depended on their status as ahl al-ketab (peoples of a [sacred] book). Bahai institutions were unable to register as corporate bodies in law (as they were doing in other countries at that time); Bahai marriages were not legally recognized; the printing, circulation, and import of Bahai literature was banned (although Bahai books and journals did continue to be published in typewritten or lithographed format); Bahai centers were often closed and meetings prohibited or disrupted; Bahais in government employ (including army officers) were occasionally dismissed or demoted. One of the most serious setbacks suffered by the Bahai community was the closure in May, 1934, of the prestigious Tarbiat school in Tehran, followed by other Bahai schools throughout the country on the grounds that these institutions had closed on Bahai holy days in the previous year. Although this last measure has to be set in the context of the broader policy towards foreign and religious minority schools in general, it had a particularly severe effect on the Bahais, whose schools, attended by many non-Bahai children from the upper and new middle classes, represented the only acceptable presence of the sect within society at large.

During this period, the Bahai community of Iran grew substantially in numbers. From an estimated 100,000 adherents in the 1880s (between 1.25 and 2.00 percent of the population), it rose to nearly 200,000 by the 1950s, by which point the Bahais were probably the largest religious minority in the country (for details, see Smith, "Babi and Baha?i Numbers"). In spite of this, Bahaism was unable to make the transition from the status of a "sect"(sociologically defined) to that of a "church" or recognized independent religious body. Bahais (including women) were generally well educated, disproportionately represented in the professional and entrepreneurial classes, included large numbers of converts from the Jewish and Zoroastrian (but not, as a rule, the Christian) communities, and had active ties with converts to their faith in Europe, North America, and elsewhere. From about 1909, American Bahai teachers and doctors lived and worked in Iran, winning the respect of liberal elements, but identifying Bahaism with foreign interests in the eyes of the more conservative (as demonstrated in the incident in 1342/1924, when the American vice-consul in Tehran, Robert Imbrie, was killed by a mob which mistakenly believed him to be a Bahai; see Momen, Bábí and Bahá?í Religions, pp. 462-65). Bahais themselves emphasized their support for Reza Shah's attacks on the clergy and for his various programs of modernization (e.g., Shoghi Effendi, Bahá?í Administration, pp. 171-73), but this failed to win them sympathy from either the shah or secular modernists, while it served further to alienate conservative and religious elements. This was to prove disastrous for the Bahais in later years, as the Pahlavi reforms came to be more widely criticized and they found themselves identified (as they had identified themselves) as bearers of Western values within an Islamic context. In this sense, the Bahais' own optimism about the pace and direction of change was, in the long term, to prove their own worst enemy once "progress" itself became charged with negative connotations; at the same time, the identification of the Bahais with secularizing reform, anti-clericalism, and support for the monarchy cannot be overlooked as, in itself, a strong factor in turning public opinion against those things.

In 1374/1955, following a series of anti-Bahai speeches by Shaikh Mohammad-Taqi Falsafi, which were broadcast throughout Iran during the month of Ramazan/April-May, the national Bahai headquarters in Tehran was occupied by the army, after which the Minister of the Interior announced in the Majles that orders had been issued for the suppression of Bahaism. With official sanction, a brutal pogrom followed across the country, in the course of which many Bahais were murdered, property (including holy sites) confiscated and destroyed, women raped, Bahais in government employ dismissed, and numerous other measures taken to harass the Bahais individually and collectively. The Bahai movement, which by this date had a widespread international following, mounted a campaign—which included an appeal to the United Nations—to bring foreign pressure to bear on the Iranian government to stop the outrages, and by 1957 the situation had returned to one of strained "normality." Various explanations have been advanced to account for the 1955 pogrom, of which Fischer's seems most plausible: that the government was trying to "buy off" the right-wing Islamic opposition of Kašani and the Feda?ian-e Eslam (Fischer, Iran, p. 187). Other factors are discussed by Akhavi (Religion and Politics, p. 77).

During the 1950s, Shaikh Mahmud Halabi's Hojjatiya organization was established with the express aim of conducting campaigns against the Bahais. Both the Hojjatiya and the Tabligat-e Eslami (Islamic propaganda) group actively worked against Bahai interests during the 1960s and 70s, disrupting meetings, intimidating sect members and would-be converts, publishing and disseminating often scurrilous anti-Bahai literature. There is even evidence of collaboration between the Tabligat-e Eslami and SAVAK in the organization of anti-Bahai activities, including extensive surveillance of sect members (Nash, Secret Pogrom, p. 51; Anonymous, Bahaism, pp. 37-54).

Since the revolution of 1979, the situation for Iranian Bahais has deteriorated seriously. During the first seven years of the new regime, some 200 Bahais, including a large proportion of the national leadership, were executed, many more imprisoned, property confiscated and destroyed on a large scale, thousands dismissed from their employment, the funds of Bahai-owned companies sequestered, and the community generally harassed as “enemies of Islam,” agents of foreign powers, or supporters of the shah’s regime. As a result of these measures, large numbers of Bahais have fled Iran, acquiring the status of religious refugees in several countries. In spite of intense international condemnation by the United Nations, human rights groups, and some national parliaments, the Iranian government has refused to modify its position on the Bahai issue, leaving fears that members of the sect will remain scapegoats for the foreseeable future.

Bahai sources regularly inflate the numbers of individuals killed in persecutions, usually citing the figure of over 20,000. This often involves conflation with the figures for Babi martyrs, but even so 20,000 is highly exaggerated. In all, it is estimated that 300 to 400 Bahais have died in the course of incidents in Iran from the inception of the movement (see MacEoin, “From Babism to Baha?ism,” pp. 236-37, and idem, “A Note on the Numbers”).

Analyses of anti-Bahai prejudice, which extends from the religious right to the political left of Iranian society, have so far been limited. The standard polemical works are grossly distorted and cannot be relied on for information about the real causes of conflict, although they do permit valuable insights into the psychological factors at work. Bahai accounts are generally more accurate but prone to oversimplification and exaggeration (see MacEoin, “Iran’s Troubled Minority”). MacEoin has attempted to develop an analysis based on the parallel between Western and Bahai perceptions of Bahaism as a positive bearer of Western, “progressive” values on the one hand and Iranian perceptions of the faith as a negative bearer of foreign, anti-Islamic influences on the other (“The Baha?is of Iran”). Future analyses may use as their model sociological work on the controversiality of new religious movements carried out in recent years in Europe and North America.

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