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branches of what might be called British intelligence, but no d the
Baha'is, who a~e under ins~c~ons to ~bey t~e la~s of the
them is known as 'the BIS'; the most familiar is the lfl ntry in
which they hve, have maintained their beliefs with great
Intelligence Service, which is usually known by its initials, SIS C0'1 ge in
the face of torture and death. And yet several thousand
its alternative (though no longer accurate) name, MI6. Roger c' :::ers of
the Faith in its earlier form were killed in Persia in the
as an experienced journalist, must have known this. As it ha •
teenth century, while since the 1979 Revolution nearly two
however, there is something called the BIS: the British Info :::dred
Baha'is have been executed, and about eight hundred
Service, which has nothing whatever to do with espiona i.,aye been
imprisoned.

provides information abroad about British life and industry. Part of
the reason lies in the origins of their religion. It began in
It had been widely expected that the broadcast would die sou them
Persian city of S~ir~z in the 1840s ~s a de~elopme.nt of
prelude to Cooper's release, or else at the worst that he wo 51U'a
Islam, just a~cept~ble withi.n the boun~anes of its teac~ings,
charged with espionage. Neither happened. Perhaps a 111(1
preaching the imminent coming of the Hidden Imam. But it was
agreement about his case within the regime prevented his wry soon
accused of heresy, and its central figure, Sayyed Ali
or perhaps the authorities were angered by the realization Mohammed,
who was styled the 'Bab' or Gate (that is, the gateway
had turned his carefully worded confession into a message 90
communication with the Hidden Imam) was sentenced to death

was not, after all, confessing to anything. Roger Cooper remained a heretic in 1848. His execution took place in Tabriz in 1850, and Edward Evin Prison, awaiting the decision of a judicial system which Granville Browne, who was fascinated by the Babis and their Faith, relates the story, accepted by many Baha'is, that the Babis vanished unhurt after the first volley from the firing-squad, In 1982, when he was in Britain, Roger Cooper wrote an influential pamphlet for the Minority Rights Group, a London-based human rights organization, about the persecution of members of Baha'ullah, the Universal Manifestation of God foretold by the Bab. In 1863 Mirza Hosayn Ali Nuri announced that he himself was exiled to Acre, which was then part of the Turkish province of Syria, and laid the foundations of the modern Baha'i Faith in his writings. He was persuaded eventually that it would. His authorship of the pamphlet which received wide attention, may well have added to the difficulties once he was arrested. He wrote of it as follows: "All religions are true, they maintain that theirs is the one most suited to the modern age. That in itself is total heresy in Islam, which believes that Mohammed is the 'Seal of the Prophets' and that Islam is the only true revelation: to suggest that it can be improved upon is the worst form of spiritual error." The Baha'is, however, pressed on with their Faith, stressing the need to improve society through universal education, world peace, and the largely (but not exclusively) based on misconceptions, so and the equality of the sexes, and through living pure and loving lives. They attempt to correct these, and thereby perhaps moderate attitudes. They have no priesthood, and no public ritual. Anyone can become a Baha'i without ceremony, and the choice is a free one; but once made, it is adhered to. There are few if any cases in Iran of giving up their religion, even under torture. Their courage and the depth of feeling that exists in Iran against the Baha'i Faith. the face of persecution has always brought them new converts; nowadays religion of peace and tolerance, it has never advocated violence. there are believed to be between 150,000 and 300,000 of

Iran or anywhere else, it avoids any forms of political involvement in them in Iran. But they are greatly disliked by most Iranians, who

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refuse to accept that their Faith constitutes a real religion, and saha'is, under Muslim law, are mahdur al-damm: those whose blood can believe - in the face of all the evidence - that the Baha'is blood can be shed with impunity. The official media vilify the especially favoured by the Shah and were linked with the corru saha'is as corrupt and treacherous, and as agents of Zionism; but under his regime; that their religion was instigated and enco the Imam Khomeini himself, though bitterly opposed to the Baha'i faith, by the British, as a means of undermining the authority of has never attacked it as he has the Kurds or the Mojaheddin. Islamic clergy in Iran; and that they are today under the con As with so many other things in Iran the persecution is neither Israel.

fficially sponsored nor officially condemned; the initiative is left The Shah certainly allowed the Baha'is a measure of prot :nth the more violent of the mullahs and the local Komitehs, and and some members of the Faith grew rich under his rule. nothing is done to curb their excesses.

long-serving prime minister, Amir Abbas Hoveyda, w The National Spiritual Assembly which constitutes the leadership of the executed after the Revolution, was always regarded as a Baha'i Faith in Iran, and the Local Spiritual Assemblies from which it because his father had been one; but each individual B nine is elected, have been an especial target. In August 1980 all members of the National Spiritual Assembly, together with two not, regarding himself instead as a Muslim. When the Shah officials, disappeared. A little over a year later the nine who replaced Iran into a one-party state in 1975, the Baha'is, being forbidd them were arrested and executed. In 1981 two members of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Shiraz were executed, and in the Local to join his Rastakhiz Party. January 1982 six members of the Local Spiritual As~embly of Tehran and the The supposed links with the British are fictitious. Various B and the woman in whose house they were meetmg were shot. In June 1983 scholars, Edward Granville Browne among them, found teenage seventeen Baha'is, including seven women and three religion interesting and attractive, and devoted study to it. A girls, were arrested in Shiraz. Several of them, both men and Baha, the son of Baha'ullah, was given a British knighthood in women, were tortured in an attempt to get them to renounce their

for having supported the British cause in Palestine against the T faith or
to provide video-taped confessions that they had been spies and that
during the 1914-18 War. But the Baha'i Faith owed nothi and that
the Baha'i Faith in general was involved in espionage for Israel.
British help or British involvement. It arose as an indepe
They refused. All seventeen were hanged.

entity and has become one of the world's fastest growing religi The
regime as such may not have instituted this pogrom against
The choice of site for the Baha'is' international headqu the
Baha'is, but it has taken administrative measures against them
what is now Israel was an historical accident; when Baha'ullah which
amount to full-scale persecution. As a community, they pay
obliged by the Turks to settle in Acre in 1868, the foundation of great
attention to the education of their children, which helps to
Israeli State still lay eighty years in the future. It is true that explain
why the Baha'is have been so successful in Iranian life. For
the Revolution Iranian Baha'is, as well as being expected to some
years schools have been instructed to demand evidence that
to Israel to visit their World Centre in Haifa, were required to children
belong to one of the formally recognized religions (Islam,
donations to it; but the funds have never been used for poll
Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity) before they can be
purposes in Israel.

enrolled. Baha'i wedding services are not accepted as lawful by the
Given the Persian's weakness for conspiracy theories, howe Islamic
Republic, so that individual members must either deny their
is not difficult to see how even those who have no love for the Is Faith
and marry according to the rites of a recognized religion, or
Republic are prepared to regard the Baha'is as a subversive they
must live in what the state regards as sin: an offence which
Before the Revolution, in the atmosphere of nationalism whi
theoretically renders them liable to whipping, or even stoning to
Shah fostered, the Baha'is were unpopular for the intema death.
nature of their doctrines; since the Revolution, they have p á By
July 1982 the government had dismissed all the Bahci'is it
penalty for being heterodox at a time of fierce religious orth employed
in the civil service, and no longer paid the retirement

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pensions of Baha'is. In 1985 it went even fúrther - á
Baha'is, they started again, and his father obtained a government
that civil servants who were Baha'is would be required to repay the á
job which, as a result of hard work and intelligence, he did well. But
full amount of the salaries they had received during their entre
he was continually passed over for promotion; the discrimination
working lives; many, unable to pay, had been imprisoned. But these:

may not have been so savage under the Shah, but it was certainly administrative measures, cruel as they are, seem gradually to be.

there. In the end the father decided to give up and become a farmer. taking the place of the more brutal persecution of the Baha'is; as with other aspects of life, the fire has diminished somewhat during'

The first day in 1968 all you could see was stones and desert. The the latter part of the 1980s. Nevertheless hatred of the Baha'is is not mountains were up there and the village was down there. But my something which was introduced by the Islamic Republic, and a father made a success of it. He was one of the few people who did will not fade altogether.

make a success of farming there.

But by 1978 all you could see round about was other people's 'Being a Baha'i must be like being a black in America.' The feeling; property. The boom had come, and people had made a lot of of being discriminated against of being despised, of being pe a money in building. So they wanted to turn my father's farm into a tually in danger of random attack, was real enough, though the. residential area, because it was more profitable for the analogy would have been more exact if the speaker had likened developers. They didn't like us being there anyway. We weren't himself and his family to Jews in a mediaeval city. All his life he had welcome in the village, and sometimes they'd turn all the been treated by ordinary Muslims as an outcast: as someone to he loudspeakers from the mosque in our direction. avoided where possible, and a convenient scapegoat at moments of Then the Revolution came, and the company that supplied us social and political tension.

.f{;_

with our animals couldn't send them to us any more, because I remember one time when we were in a village. I was seven or:&. they'd all died. After that we had to try to import our animals, and eight. We had a driver, and we gave him some ice to take home to f.: that meant we needed permits. But the permits took a long time coming. That meant we weren't earning much money, and the his family because it was a very hot day. I went with the driver.á~á• when he took the car home and gave the ice to his wife. I saw her t}á bank wanted its loans back.

throw the ice out and shout out something about Baha'is. :~á.

In the end they took the farm away from us, and all our t:

Sometimes my father would come home and say he had met.~áá furniture got stolen. All my father's clothes went, and all the so-and-so, and after they had shaken hands he would see him go~á things from my childhood: you know, toys and books. And that off to wash his hands. It was a ritual washing, like when a dog .; was how we lost our heritage.

passes a Muslim in the street before prayers. Other times when you went to someone's house you knew that after you left they would wash out the chair you had sat on, and the cup you had used. It was always worse in smaller places where there was more ignorance and the mullahs had more power. Some people used to tell their kids not to play with us. I remember that the black market. They moved to their house in Tehran; and in 1982 they decided they would have to leave the country altogether, since the farm had gone and they had no money except what they could usually get from selling their furniture and jewellery. He is a young man, serious and well-educated in the way of the farm had gone and they had no money except what they could usually get from selling their furniture and jewellery. heavily depleted by the exactions and losses incurred through years of public and private pressure. These are not the first troubled times The time when they just confiscated things or you could just pay the family has been through, and the young man's parents both money to keep out of gaol was over. Now they wanted people. knew poverty when they were young. But, again in the way of the Father went into hiding for two months, and he didn't contact my 236 á BEHIND IRANIAN LINES

mother the whole of that time - it was too dangerous. The Plan was for her to get out to Pakistan, and then he would join her a

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week later.

Well, she made it. You could get out quite easily then to Pakistan through Baluchistan, if you paid money. They don't like.

On The Road

Bahá'is much in Pakistan now, because they're pretty strong Muslims too; but she got out all the same. It wasn't until she was safe that she found out my father had been arrested. There'd been a raid on the house, and they took him away. She wanted to go But when he [the Persian muleteer] is fairly started he becomes a different man. With the dust of the city he back, of course, but it would have been suicide. They'd h shakes off the exasperating manner which has hitherto executed her for sure. made him so objectionable. He sniffs the pure exhilarating air of the desert, he strides forward manfully on the broad interminable road (which is, indeed, for the most The father was charged with helping his wife to escape, with sen part but the track worn by countless generations of money out of the country, and with Zionism. The case dragged on

travellers), he beguiles the tediousness of the march with several years, and there was never any result. Now it has fallen into songs and stories, interrupted by occasional shouts of abeyance; but at any moment, if the authorities chose, he could~ encouragement or warning to his animals. His life is a arrested again and brought to trial. He has no money of his own to hard one, and he has to put up with many disagreeables; live on, and for them to send him money from abroad would be so that he might be pardoned even if he lost his temper dangerous. Instead, he has to exist on the generosity of relatives. His oftener than he usually does.

wife and son talk to him occasionally on the telephone, they in their

Edward Granville Browne,

new life and he in the old. During those difficult, strained calls they

A Year Amongst The Persians, 1893

never mention the case against him; and the only way they have of judging whether he is in any trouble is from his tone of voice. á

There are many Baha'is in worse conditions: their pensions We

had skirted round the southern edge of Qom, and had left

stopped, obliged to pay back enormous sums to the government~.

behind us the well-constructed freeway which links the holy city

imprisoned, perhaps tortured. Those who have survived best are

with Tehran and enables the civil servants to consult the ayatollahs,

the people who work for themselves - taxi-drivers, small busi

and the ayatollahs to make the journey to the capital to check that

nessmen, craftsmen. The richer Baha'is help the poorer ones. They"

their instructions are being carried out. South of Qom the road had

are not like the early Christians, rejoicing in martyrdom; but since

reverted to its pre-Revolutionary self: a narrow ribbon of black

they only have to make a simple statement to cease being Bahci'is,

tarmac, two lanes wide, across the dry yellow landscape. We were

and thereby cut their links with the most important part of their

driving too fast, but that was something I had long grown used to;

lives, the simple statement remains unmade. my

first extensive experience of long-distance driving in Iran had

been on this road in February 1979, a week or so before the

It's difficult to understand, maybe, if you aren't a Baha'i. It's a

Revolution took place, and Mahmoudi, then as now, was the driver.

system of living. For us, working in a spirit of service isn't any He

settled now behind a grey Paykan which contained at least

different from praying. Being a Baha'i is a progressive thing - seven

human beings, and maybe more: two of the women on board

kind of like going to school, except it never ends. It doesn't matteráá may

have had small children on their laps. In front of them was a line

how many Baha'is are in gaol, or even killed, it'll carry on. of

four other cars. We were perhaps five yards behind the grey

we certainly don't want to convert anybody. We just want

Paykan. I tried nervously to read Mahmoudi's speedometer, but it
make them understand.

seemed to function irregularly, dropping back or surging forwards

— Behind Iranian Lines (Used by permission of the curator)