

The Bahá'ís Of Iran

Margaret Bremner

Abstract

The Bahá'ís of Iran concerns the Iranian Bahá'í situation since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979-1980. This article begins with a brief résumé of events in 1980 and 1981 which led to the Canadian Bahá'í community becoming involved in the private sponsorship of refugees. This article then discusses the Canadian Bahá'í refugee program of the 1980s, including the relationship of the Bahá'í community of Canada with the Canadian government and the growth of the initially national program into one of global proportions. Reasons for the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran are explained, as is the nature of the persecution. In the 1991 secret Government memorandum the Bahá'í Question is noted, and details are provided regarding last autumn's raids on homes involved with the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education. The reader is then brought up to date regarding the current private sponsorship of refugees by the Bahá'í Community of Canada. This article concludes with a short comment regarding remedies.

Résumé

Les Bahá'ís d'Iran examine la situation des Bahá'ís en Iran depuis la révolution islamique de 1979-80 dans ce pays. Cet article commence par donner un bref aperçu des événements survenus en 1980 et 1981, et qui amenèrent la communauté bahá'íe canadienne à s'engager dans la voie du parrainage privé de réfugiés. L'article examine ensuite le programme Canadien bahá'íe de parrainage de réfugiés des années 80, y compris les relations de la

communauté bahá'íe canadienne avec le gouvernement canadien et la manière dont un programme, qui avait débuté au niveau national, a fini par prendre des proportions globales. Les raisons derrière la persécution des Bahá'ís en Iran sont expliquées, ainsi que la nature de ces persécutions. La mention de la Question bahá'íe dans le mémorandum secret du gouvernement de 1991 est notée, et des détails sont donnés sur les descentes des lieux qui ont eu lieu à l'automne dernier chez des familles associées à l'Institut bahá'íe d'éducation supérieure. Enfin, les informations les plus récentes sur le programme courant de parrainage de réfugiés par la communauté bahá'íe du Canada sont présentées au lecteur. Cet article conclut avec un bref commentaire sur des solutions possibles.

Introduction

Beginning in 1979, fanatical elements steadily gained control of the Islamic revolution in Iran. It became increasingly apparent to Bahá'ís elsewhere that many of their fellow believers in that country were in serious danger, particularly if they had been visibly active as Bahá'ís. In June of 1980, executions of prominent Bahá'ís began.

In early 1980, as a direct result of the Islamic revolution, a number of Iranian Bahá'ís residing in Canada began to seek the assistance of their national administrative body – the National Spiritual Assembly – in securing the entry to Canada of friends and relatives who were stranded overseas without travel documents.

In the summer of 1981, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs circulated instructions to its embassies around the world that they should “carefully prepare a list of names of all the Bahá'ís residing within [their] jurisdiction” and “refrain from extending the passports of those individuals.”¹ If Iranian Bahá'ís who were abroad returned home, they would face persecution be-

cause of their religion; if they stayed abroad until their passports expired, and were not in an asylum-granting country, they became stateless. They were bona fide Convention refugees. The Bahá'ís in Iran were not suffering under a repressive regime; they were being actively persecuted by that regime. This marked the beginning of a large wave of Bahá'í refugees.

Recognition of Bahá'í Refugees Following the Islamic Revolution

Canada has demonstrated its commitment to promoting refugee rights through its willingness to consider cases on their unique merits, rather than simply applying the letter of the law. Canada was the first country to draw attention to the severe persecutions suffered by the Bahá'í community of Iran when, in both July 1980 and June 1981, the House of Commons passed strongly worded resolutions urging the government to bring the issue to the attention of the United Nations. This was the first intervention of its kind to be made by a national legislature. Later, Canada was the first country in the world to accept, as refugees, women who were fleeing persecution based on gender.

In late 1980, representatives of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada met with senior officers of both the Department of Immigration and the Department of External Affairs to discuss landed immigrant status in Canada for Iranian Bahá'ís in various countries who had not been able to renew their passports. The National Spiritual Assembly had identified three categories that were acknowledged by the Department as deserving of consideration:

1) those already in Canada and having difficulty with their immigration process; 2) those in an exposed position

Margaret Bremner has been a member of the Bahá'í faith for over twenty-five years. Since 1988, she has been working at the Bahá'í Community of Canada's Ottawa Office, focusing on refugee matters and sponsorships undertaken by the Bahá'í Community of Canada under its Master Sponsorship Agreement.

overseas and who had relatives in Canada; and 3) those with no relatives in Canada but who appeared similarly vulnerable.

The National Spiritual Assembly told the government that it would verify and guarantee the Bahá'í status of all applicants and guaranteed that the Iranian Bahá'í immigrants would not become public charges.

Private Sponsorship by the Bahá'í Community of Canada

The National Spiritual Assembly signed an umbrella agreement with the then Department of Employment and Immigration in October 1980, under which it assumed full responsibility for refugee sponsorships undertaken by its constituent groups. Thus, at the outset, this national body was, itself, the sponsor of all the Bahá'í refugees who came to Canada.

In 1982 there were 20,000 Bahá'ís in Canada, living in 1500 localities. In 325 of those localities there were enough adult Bahá'ís to permit the annual election of an administrative body called a Local Spiritual Assembly. Some of these Local Spiritual Assemblies became the constituent groups of refugee sponsorship. Canadian immigration authorities left the decision of where the Bahá'í refugees would settle, entirely in the hands of the National Spiritual Assembly. Very careful consideration was given before a local community was enlisted as a constituent group.

Fund-raising was centralized and funds for the sponsorships were distributed to the local groups from a centrally administered relief fund. Settlement responsibilities, however, were localized. Much support came from local in-kind contributions. The resultant costs were approximately half of what was spent on basic living allowances for government-sponsored refugees under the Indochinese refugee program. The refugees were given these monies as an interest-free loan from the national Bahá'í fund, to be re-paid over a long period of time, or which, under special circumstances, could be waived.

In November 1982, the National

Spiritual Assembly was able to report to the Department of Immigration that over 75% of the 200 Iranian Bahá'ís who had arrived thus far, had already been able to find employment. This fact moved the government to suggest that it would be interested in setting up its own Iranian Bahá'í settlement program, to run parallel to the one operated by the Bahá'ís themselves. By the summer of 1983, Canadian immigration officials in various foreign capitals were prepared to provide informal references that might induce embassies of other countries to take a favourable view of Iranian Bahá'í refugee applicants. This was particularly the case with regards to other Commonwealth countries.

Canada's Department of Immigration led the world in admitting and resettling Bahá'í refugees who had left Iran during the early years of the Islamic Revolution. In 1983 and 1984, through the efforts of Bahá'í representatives and Canadian government officials, the refugee program broadened beyond the Commonwealth and the United States to include Scandinavia, western Europe and Latin America. Several countries who had established traditions of not accepting refugees (notably Ireland and Switzerland) relented in the case of Iranian Bahá'ís.

By the summer of 1984, over 1,000 Bahá'í refugees had been resettled in Canada in 150 different localities. Almost all were either employed or registered at college or university. Internationally, the Bahá'ís felt that the time had come when a worldwide agency was needed, an International Bahá'í Refugee Office was established with its headquarters in the national Bahá'í Centre near Toronto. Five years later, at the end of 1989 when this office was phasing out its work, over 10,000 Iranian Bahá'ís had been successfully resettled in 25 countries.

Why are the Bahá'ís in Iran Persecuted?

While the Bahá'í Faith is not well regarded in most Muslim countries, such is particularly the case in Iran. The Bahá'í Faith originated in Iran (then Persia) in the middle of the nineteenth

century and is now that country's largest religious minority. Its followers have been persecuted to various degrees since that time.

The September/October 1982 issue of "Refuge" periodical stated that "Persecution of the Bahá'ís is not new to Iran. There was some persecution of them in the 1950s under the Shah. In the revolution of 1906-11, they were accused of being the conspiratorial force behind the constitutional movement by one side and charged with promoting authoritarianism by the other. Ironically, this came about because their religious principles command them to be loyal supporters of their government while remaining aloof from partisan politics and to promote an international world order. In fact, since the Bahá'í religion was founded in 1844, Bahá'ís have endured very serious persecution, killings and pogroms in Iran."

Generally, Muslims believe that divine revelation ceased after Muhammad and that the only true religions are Islam and those which predate it. The Bahá'í Faith teaches that divine revelation is continuous and that all the great religions are divinely inspired and represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of humanity and society - an evolution which will continue into the future with the advent of new Messengers or Manifestations of God. For this reason, the claims of the Bahá'í Faith are viewed as a challenge.

The location of the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, is regarded by Iranian authorities as evidence that the Bahá'í Faith is not a religion at all, but a political movement with Zionist sympathies and Bahá'ís in Iran are commonly charged with Zionist espionage activities. Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, was exiled from Iran by the Persian and Ottoman governments of the time, successively to Baghdad, Constantinople, Adrianople, and finally - in 1868 - to what was then the prison city of Akka, near Haifa. The designation of the Haifa/Akka area as the world centre of the international Bahá'í community dates

from this period, the latter decades of the 1800s. The modern state of Israel was established in 1948, several decades later.

The Bahá'í Faith has no clergy; rather, its communities are governed by elected local, national and international bodies. On 3 September 1983, these Bahá'í institutions were officially banned in Iran – a total of 400. Communications by the Bahá'ís of Iran with Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions in other countries often result in charges of espionage and crimes against national security, particularly when that communication is with the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa.

In addition, some Bahá'í teachings and practices, such as equal rights for women and men, the compatibility of science and religion, the administration of the Bahá'í community by elected bodies and the abrogation of a professional clergy, are rejected by – and arouse the anger of – Islamic fundamentalists.

What is the Nature of the Persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran?

Discrimination against Bahá'ís in Iran, by reason of their faith, involves the denial of the most fundamental of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Identified as members of a misguided group, prejudice amongst the population has been fomented against them by the Muslim clergy and the Iranian government to the extent that today the word 'Bahá'í' has become an obscenity. Authorities often use the Bahá'í community as a scapegoat. Since 1979, more than 200 Bahá'ís have been killed and another 15 have disappeared and are presumed dead.

In Iran, most government application forms have a 'religion' column which must be completed using one of the four faiths officially recognized in the Constitution, which was drawn up in April 1979. The Bahá'í Faith is excluded from the Iranian Constitution and as a consequence Bahá'ís are frequently denied access to those government-related goods, services and employment opportunities afforded other Iranian citizens. Bahá'ís have been dismissed from gov-

ernment positions, their pensions have been denied and in some cases pensions and salaries which had already been paid, were demanded returned, with the threat of imprisonment for noncompliance. Bahá'ís have been specifically denied access to certain professions, notably the legal profession; Bahá'í lawyers' licenses were revoked in 1983. Business licenses issued to Bahá'ís by the Department of Properties have been annulled.

The Iranian government does not grant legal recognition to Bahá'í marriages, resulting in many Bahá'í children being regarded as illegitimate. Charges of prostitution, adultery and immorality are other results. In divorce cases, where the mother is Bahá'í and the father is not, Bahá'í mothers are frequently denied custody of their children. The Iranian judiciary often refuses to issue a probate and thus Bahá'í heirs are denied their inheritance. Iranian Civil Law (Article 881) states that "An infidel cannot inherit from a Muslim and if among the heirs of an infidel there exists a Muslim, the heirs of the infidel will not benefit at all from the inheritance, even if they are higher up in the lineage than the Muslim." Bahá'ís are routinely denied the due legal process of written charges, written judgements, and legal representation. The law regarding compensation for any offense against a person is not applied if the victim of the crime is a Bahá'í.

Bahá'í places of worship have been confiscated and destroyed and graveyards have been appropriated and desecrated. Bahá'ís have been evicted from their homes and properties. The assets, properties and buildings of Bahá'í charitable and humanitarian foundations have been seized and no compensation has been provided.

Current Situation of the Bahá'ís of Iran: "The Bahá'í Question"

In February 1991 a secret Iranian Government memorandum, "The Bahá'í Question", was drawn up by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council and signed by Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Mr.

Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, then the United Nations' Special Representative investigating the human rights situation in Iran, obtained this document in 1993 and made it public. The memorandum firmly established a subtle government policy aimed essentially at grinding the Bahá'í community into non-existence by forcing Bahá'í children to have a strong Islamic education, pushing Bahá'í adults into the economic periphery, forcing them from all positions of prominence or influence and requiring that Bahá'í youth "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."

Islamic fundamentalists regard Bahá'ís as heretics and those who convert from Islam to the Bahá'í faith as apostates for whom Islamic law prescribes the death penalty. Informing others of the teachings and tenets of the Bahá'í Faith is forbidden.

Arbitrary arrests of Bahá'ís continue, with a marked increase in short term arrests since 1996 in various parts of the country. Bahá'ís have been arrested for organizing informal classes for their children and youth in order to instruct them in the teachings of their faith. Two individuals are currently serving three year jail terms for providing moral education classes to Bahá'í youth. Twelve youth arrested with their teachers were given five-year suspended sentences and were warned that they would serve their terms if they ever attended another moral education class. More than 200 Bahá'ís have been detained for periods ranging from 48 hours to six months. Fifteen individuals remain in prison, by reason of their membership and activities in the Bahá'í Faith.

The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (B.I.H.E.)

Since 1980, young people who declare their Bahá'í identity have been systematically excluded from colleges and universities in Iran. For a few years they were even prevented from attending the final year of high school;

this restriction ended in 1998. Deeply concerned at seeing an entire generation languish without the opportunity for higher education, in 1987 Bahá'ís in Iran established their own independent, full-fledged, yet completely decentralized, university system. The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education was not an "underground university" since its existence was well-known to the authorities from its earliest years.

Of the roughly 1500 students who applied for admission in its first year of operation, 250 were accepted. By 1998 approximately 900 students were enrolled. At its peak, the Institute had more than 150 faculty members, of whom 25-30 were professors who had been fired from Government-run universities following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Other faculty included professionals who donated their time to teach the students. None of the faculty was paid; all viewed the work as a form of community service.

In late September and early October 1998, as was widely reported in the international news media, agents of the Iranian Government staged a series of sweeping raids on 500 Bahá'í homes. They arrested 36 members of the B.I.H.E.'s faculty and staff and confiscated much of its equipment and records. Ethan Bronner, writing in the *New York Times* on October 29, 1998, said that the raids "brought to an abrupt end an elaborate act of communal self-preservation."

Until the Government raids, the B.I.H.E. offered Bachelor's degrees in ten subject areas: accounting, applied chemistry, biology, dental science, civil engineering, computer science, law, literature, pharmacological science, and psychology. The teaching was done principally by correspondence, although for specialized scientific and technical courses, small-group classes were usually held in private homes. The Institute also had a few laboratories, operated in privately owned commercial buildings in and around Tehran.

To informed observers, these arrests and confiscations were clearly part of a long-standing and centrally

orchestrated campaign by Iranian authorities to deal with Iran's Bahá'ís "in such a way that their progress and development are blocked" - as stated in the secret 1991 Government memorandum that instructed authorities on how to deal with "the Bahá'í question".

International and Canadian Response

Since 1985, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted resolutions critical of Iran's human rights abuses. In 1997 and 1998 these resolutions called for the implementation of recommendations made by Special Rapporteur Abdelfattah Amor with respect to the restoration of the rights of not only the Bahá'ís in Iran, but of all religious minorities in that country. Special Representative Maurice Copithorne in his most recent report to the United Nations, while noting some improvements in some human rights areas, commented that the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran had not improved, and indeed perhaps it had worsened.

Over the past several years the Canadian Government, through its Department of Foreign Affairs, has voted for strong resolutions both at the General Assembly of the United Nations and at the annual sessions of the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva. On October 7, 1998, Canadian Members of Parliament adopted an all-party motion that the House "express profound concern over the recent grave attacks on the Iranian Bahá'í community" and called "upon the government of Iran to end their oppression of the Bahá'í community". This action followed quickly on the heels of press releases from the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lloyd Axworthy calling upon the "judicial authorities to end their oppression of the Iranian Bahá'í community and respect the rights that are provided for the Bahá'ís under the Iranian constitution."

Private Sponsorship by the Bahá'í Community of Canada Today

For many years, Bahá'ís holding Iranian citizenship were unable to obtain

Iranian passports. Recently, it has become possible for some Bahá'ís to be granted these documents after considerable effort and a lengthy delay. In some cases it has taken as much as seven years of repeated applications and inquiries. Passports are often issued with unwarranted restrictions - whether the application is made in Iran or abroad. At one time, in order to leave Iran via the Tehran airport, it was necessary to sign a form stating that one was not a Bahá'í. Thus, many Bahá'ís travelled overland, initially to Pakistan or Turkey.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada holds a Master Sponsorship Agreement for the sponsorship of refugees with the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. While the numbers are nowhere near as sizeable as during the crisis of the early eighties, the Bahá'í Community of Canada continues to privately sponsor Bahá'í refugees on a diminished scale, approximately half-and-half 'named' and 'unnamed' refugees.

In mid-1997 the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada opened an Ottawa Office of the Bahá'í Community of Canada. One of the mandates of this office is to handle refugee matters. The Ottawa office assists the National Spiritual Assembly in the identification of an appropriate local community to act as constituent group. Once a local community has agreed to provide refugee assistance, the staff works with the community through to the arrival of the refugee and on until the end of the one- or two-year sponsorship period. In 1999, under the Master Sponsorship Agreement, some local Bahá'í communities offered to sponsor Kosovar refugees.

Remedies

The Canadian Human Rights Commission's 1998 Annual Report, in the section on Race, Religion And Ethnic Origin, states, "With the exception of Aboriginal people, we are a country composed of immigrants and their de-

scendants. Every year, thousands of newcomers, including many refugees, come to Canada to begin new lives. They have prospered, but so too has Canada. We are richer because of the talents and skills they have brought with them and it would be hard to imagine our country without their contributions."

This last sentence ultimately holds true for any country, city or group which has, through whatever circumstances, diversified its population. We are all necessarily richer through exposure to different languages, colours, names, faith traditions, modes of dress, celebrations, foods and ways of doing things. We would not think of Irish policemen in New York City were it not for the potato famine. Marco Polo's encounter with noodles in China gave Italians their pasta. Discarded Japanese packing materials provided European artists with the idea of wood-block printmaking.

We need to recognize our planet as the homeland of one human family. To achieve the conditions necessary for a peaceful, sustainable and advancing civilization, diversity must be welcomed within a fundamentally transformed understanding of our relationship to one another. A recent document issued by the Bahá'í International Community's Office of Public Information says that "The central spiritual issue facing all people ... whatever their nation, religion, or ethnic origin, is that of laying the foundations of a global society that can reflect the oneness of human nature. The unification of the earth's inhabitants is neither a remote utopian vision nor, ultimately, a matter of choice. It constitutes the next, inescapable stage in the process of social evolution, a stage toward which all the experience of past and present is impelling us. Until this issue is acknowledged and addressed, none of the ills afflicting our planet will find solutions, because all the essential challenges of the age we have entered are global and universal, not particular or regional."²

As we respond to the needs of the rising tide of refugees world wide, let us help others welcome diversity in our communities and promote the concept of our planet as the home of all of humanity. As Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, stated over a hundred years ago, "the well-being of mankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established."³ ■

Notes

1. From a circular letter from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated 21/5/1360 (12 August 1981), and quoted in "Refuge" magazine, September/October 1982.
2. "Who is Writing the Future? - Reflections on the Twentieth Century", section II.
3. "Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh", section CXXXI. □

Background Information on the Centre for Refugee Studies

The Centre for Refugee Studies (CRS) is an organized research unit of York University. Founded in 1988, the Centre for Refugee Studies is successor to the Refugee Documentation Project created in 1981 for the conservation and analysis of research documents and data collected by Operation Lifeline during the crisis of Indochinese Boat People. In 1991, CRS was designated as a Centre of Excellence by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

The Centre for Refugee Studies fosters interdisciplinary and collaborative research in all of its undertakings. The efforts of CRS are focused in areas related to a comprehensive research programme expanding from theoretical to institutional research. In carrying out this research, CRS networks with Canadian and international development agencies and academic institutes. CRS invites scholars from abroad to participate in the research. Canadian and international students are supported by CRS to undertake field studies and conduct related research. Joint research activities with institutions in the developing countries are underway. CRS plays a significant role in an advisory capacity with Canadian government and other agencies.

In our education initiatives, the general Certificate programme allows students in the undergraduate programmes (Faculty of Arts of Environmental Studies, Atkinson College and Glendon College) to register specifically for the Certificate and to specialize formally in the area of Refugee and Migration Studies and to be awarded the Certificate concurrently with the BA or BES. Students who already have an undergraduate degree can be admitted as special students by the relevant faculties and complete the requirements to receive a Certificate in Refugee and Migration Studies. The Graduate Diploma programmes offer incentives and recognition to students whose academic focus is on any of the refugee related issues. The Graduate Diploma programme was developed and passed by the Graduate Faculty Council and subsequently by the York Senate in April 1991. The Diploma is awarded concurrently to the graduate student who completes the diploma and the degree requirements.

Our communications initiatives involve acquisition efforts through data collection in our Andrew Forbes Resource Centre, a comprehensive publications programme including the periodical REFUGE and a full programme of seminars, workshops, and conferences.