



# BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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## Status of the Bahá'ís in Iran: Basic Facts and Updates February 15, 2017

- Some 300,000 Bahá'ís live throughout Iran, making the Bahá'í Faith the country's largest minority religion. Although originating in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century, the Bahá'í Faith has become a global religion with over 5 million followers in over 200 countries and territories. It is an independent religion – not a sect of Islam – with its own sacred scriptures which recognize the divine origin of all of the world's great religious systems, the oneness of the human race, the equality of men and women, the harmony of science and religion, and the importance of universal education. It eschews violence.
- While Bahá'ís in Iran have been persecuted since the religion began there in the nineteenth century, the persecution has greatly intensified since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. More than 200 Bahá'ís were killed between 1978 and 1998, the majority by execution, and thousands more were imprisoned.
- Economic and social pressure on Iran's Bahá'í community is acute. Government jobs have been denied to Bahá'ís since the years immediately following the Revolution. Muslims are often pressured to refuse employment to Bahá'ís and to dismiss Bahá'ís from their employment in the private sector. Bahá'ís are also often denied business licenses and thus cannot open their own businesses. Bahá'í marriages are not recognized. Bahá'ís are excluded from public universities, and university students discovered to be Bahá'ís are expelled. At times, the government permits the enrollment of a few students known to be Bahá'ís so that it may publicly state that Bahá'ís are enrolled in university – only to expel them later and prohibit them from graduating. Bahá'í school children are frequently harassed by classmates, teachers, and administrators. Bahá'í homes and businesses are raided by government agents and the property of Bahá'ís is often confiscated without compensation. Bahá'í holy places have been attacked and destroyed. Bahá'ís are not permitted to bury their dead according to Bahá'í law, and Bahá'í cemeteries have been vandalized, desecrated and destroyed.
- Iran's state-sponsored news media systematically disseminate propaganda intended to incite hatred against Iran's Bahá'í community. This propaganda often scapegoats Bahá'ís for economic and political unrest in Iran, and is characterized by a range of baseless accusations, including espionage, promiscuity, sexual deviance, armed rebellion, brainwashing and “cult-like” practices, opposition to the government, threatening national security, and blasphemy and animosity towards Islam. The propaganda pieces are often illustrated by images of zombies, the grim reaper, and Bahá'í holy places transformed into hell-like landscapes. There has been a recent surge in this type of propaganda: the Bahá'í International Community reports that, in 2010 and 2011, approximately 22 anti-Bahá'í pieces were appearing in state-sponsored media outlets every month. In 2014, the number of anti-Bahá'í pieces rose to approximately 400 per month; during 2015, the number of pieces averaged roughly 270 a month; and in 2016, it jumped to approximately 1,500 per month.
- Bahá'ís are routinely arrested, detained, and imprisoned. Over 700 Bahá'ís have been arrested since 2004. The number of Bahá'ís in the prison system has increased markedly in the last few years. During 2011, 156 Bahá'ís were arrested, compared to an average of about 50 arrests per year from 2004 to 2010. In January 2011, there were 57 Bahá'ís in prison and 230 Bahá'ís who, although not currently in prison, were awaiting trial, appeal, sentencing, or the commencement of their sentences. In January 2014, the number of Bahá'ís in prison reached a two-decade high of 136, and the number awaiting trial, appeal, sentencing, or the commencement of their sentences reached 443. There are currently 90 Bahá'ís in prison.

### **The Yaran (the former national Bahá'í leadership group in Iran)**

- In May 2008, Iranian authorities arrested the seven members of the ad hoc leadership group of the Bahá'ís, known as the Yaran-i-Iran, or “friends of Iran,” and detained them in Iran’s notorious Evin prison. The Bahá'í community has no clergy and governs itself through elected bodies. Because there have been no Bahá'í institutions in Iran since the government outlawed them in 1983, the Yaran were informally acting to administer the affairs of the community.
- Accounts in Iranian government-sponsored news media said that the members of the Yaran – Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi, Mr. Jamaloddin Khanjani, Mr. Afif Naeimi, Mr. Saeid Rezaie, Mrs. Mahvash Sabet, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli, and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm – were formally charged with espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, the establishment of an illegal administration, cooperation with Israel, sending secret documents outside the country, acting against the security of the country, and corruption on earth. They categorically denied all the charges.
- The Yaran were tried in a series of closed-door sessions from January to August 2010, during which time they were denied any meaningful access to their lawyers. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Mrs. Shirin Ebadi, one of the lawyers for the seven leaders, reported that there was no evidence against the seven to sustain the charges against them and that their trial was riddled with irregularities. All seven were sentenced to 20 year prison terms.
- After their sentencing, the Yaran were moved from Evin prison to Iran’s notorious Gohardasht prison, where the five men are still being held in appalling conditions. The two women were then transferred back to Evin prison.
- In late 2015, the Yaran’s sentences were reportedly reduced to 10 years, pursuant to changes in the penal code.

### **The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education**

- The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) is an informal higher education system created in 1987 by members of the Bahá'í community in Iran as a direct response to the expulsion of Bahá'í students and educators from Iranian universities. In 1998, 2001, and 2002, a series of sweeping raids resulted in arrests of BIHE faculty and staff and the confiscation of much of its equipment and materials.
- In May 2011, the Government of Iran again raided the homes of individuals associated with BIHE, searching approximately 39 homes, seizing educational materials, and arresting 18 individuals. In June 2011, following the May raids, state-sponsored media reported that the government had declared BIHE to be illegal.
- In July 2011, seven BIHE faculty and staff were reportedly charged with “conspiracy against national security” and “conspiracy against the Islamic Republic of Iran” by “establishing the illegal Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education.” Their trials began in September and concluded in mid-October. A member of their defense team, noted human rights lawyer Abdolfattah Soltani, was detained in 2011 and is now serving a 13-year prison sentence.
- Following the trials, Mr. Kamran Mortezaie and Mr. Vahid Mahmoudi were each sentenced to five years’ imprisonment and the remaining five – Mr. Mahmoud Badavam, Ms. Noushin Khadem, Mr. Farhad Sedghi, Mr. Riaz Sobhani, and Mr. Ramin Zibaie – to four years’ imprisonment. The crime was announced as: “Membership of the deviant sect of Bahá'ísm, with the goal of taking action against the security of the country, in order to further the aims of the deviant sect and those of organizations outside the country.” In January 2012, Mr. Mahmoudi was released on probation. In April 2015, Mr. Badavam, Ms. Khadem, Mr. Sedghi, Mr. Sobhani, and Mr. Zibaie were released after serving their sentences. In April 2016, Mr. Mortezaie was released after serving his sentence.
- Since then, several more BIHE instructors were imprisoned. Ms. Faran Hessami; Mr. Kamran Rahimian; Mr. Shahin Negari; Ms. Nasim Bagheri Tari; and Ms. Azita Rafizadeh were given four-year sentences. Mr. Kayvan Rahimian (Kamran’s brother); Dr. Foad Moghaddam; Mr. Amanollah Mostaghim, Mr. Azizullah Samandari, and Mr. Payman Koushk-Baghi received five year sentences. In August 2015, Mr. Kamran Rahimian was released after serving his sentence; in April 2016, Ms. Hessami was released after serving her sentence. In November 2016, Mr. Negari was released after serving his sentence. The other seven remain in prison.