

Leland W. Robinson
University of Tennessee

THE BASES OF ANTI-BAHA'I ATTITUDES IN IRAN

Four sets of factors (religious, political, economic, and socio-cultural) are examined to explain the prejudice and discrimination against Bahá'ís in Iran. Religious factors are identified as being the most important and fundamental since the Bahá'í Faith violates cherished beliefs of devout Twelver Shí'ís, and thus is seen by them as neither a legitimate independent religion nor as a legitimate sect of Shí'í Islám. The other factors contribute to the hostility against Bahá'ís, but derive most of their strength from the pre-existing religious animosity.

Since Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death in 1989, the nation of Iran has departed from the center state of world attention. It has therefore been easy to forget that there still remains in Iran a persecuted religious minority: the Bahá'ís. The prejudice and discrimination against Bahá'ís both predates and postdates Khomeini and the Iranian revolution. In the 19th Century, thousands of Bahá'ís were branded as heretics and put to death in circumstances of appalling cruelty, and since then there have been periodic waves of persecution.

The most recent wave, during the Khomeini years, resulted in over one hundred Bahá'í leaders being killed and many more being imprisoned. Bahá'í shrines, centers, cemeteries, and welfare facilities were damaged, destroyed or confiscated, as were many homes and businesses owned by Bahá'ís. Bahá'í employees were fired, and Bahá'í children were denied education. It was declared illegal for Bahá'ís to print literature, hold meetings, or organize in any way.

In the last few years the killing and imprisoning of Bahá'ís and the destruction of their property have ceased, but most of the other forms of persecution have continued. The Bahá'í Faith is still illegal, Bahá'ís still may not organize in any way, and Bahá'ís still face discrimination in education and employment.

Why have Bahá'ís been subjected to this prejudice and discrimination? Bahá'ís see their victimization as a textbook pure case of religious

persecution.¹ However, no long-term case of religious persecution is ever purely and simply religious in nature. There are always other factors, real and imagined, which promote the prejudice and discrimination against the persecuted group. In this paper the author will examine the religious bases for the hostility toward Bahá'ís and their faith, and will then go on to examine a number of other factors which have reinforced and perpetuated that hostility.²

RELIGIOUS FACTORS

Seal of the Prophets

One of the most important of the religious factors generating hostility toward Bahá'ís concerns Muhammad's assertion that he was the 'Seal of the Prophets'. This is interpreted by Muslims as meaning that although there have been many prophets in the history of the human race, the 'door of prophethood' was closed forever by Muhammad. Bahá'ís, on the other hand, believe that there have been two prophets (or 'Messengers of God' as they are called by Bahá'ís) since Muhammad (the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh) and that there will be others in the future.

Bahá'ís claim that Muslims misunderstand the phrase 'Seal of the Prophets', and that Muhammad did not intend, by the use of that phrase, to indicate that there would be no future Messengers of God. This Bahá'í argument, however, is rejected by both the Shí'í and Sunni branches of Islám. As a result, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh are considered by Muslims to be impostors, and their followers to be infidels.

The Twelfth Imam

The Shí'í sect that is dominant in Iran is known as the Ja'fari or Twelver sect. Twelver Shí'ís believe that the divine line of descent

1. For a Baha'i perspective on the persecution see *The Bahá'ís in Iran: A Report on the Persecution of a Religious Minority*, New York, Bahá'í International Community 1982.

2. Research for this paper included the reading of available literature in English on Muslim/Bahá'í relationships in Iran, as well as lengthy and intensive interviews with a sample of ten Iranian Muslims and ten Iranian Bahá'ís. The interviewees were all born and raised in Iran, and most lived a good part of their adult life in that country, but are currently living in the United States.

from Muhammad includes Muhammad's son-in-law Ali, Ali's two sons Hasan and Husein, and their nine successors. These twelve individuals are referred to by Twelver Shí'ís as Imáms, a usage of the term that is more specific than the way the term is used by Sunnis. Imáms are not prophets since they do not have the power to reveal God's law. They do, however, have the power to guide mankind by upholding and interpreting the Divine Law.

The Twelfth Imám vanished from sight in the Ninth Century (Third Century of the Islámic calendar), and is believed to have been put in hiding by God to protect him from his enemies. Twelver Shí'ís believe that the Twelfth Imám (The 'Hidden Imám') still lives, and that he continues, from his hiding place in the mythical city of Jabulqa, to influence the affairs of the human race. One day, shortly before the final Day of Judgement, the Twelfth Imám will return in the role of the Mahdí, the divinely guided restorer of the Faith. He will have a final victorious confrontation with evil, and will establish a reign of righteousness and justice throughout the world.

This belief system is absolutely central to the form of Shí'ism dominant in Iran. Thus, when the Báb claimed to be not only an independent prophet but also the Mahdí, these claims cut to the core of Twelver Shí'ism. They resulted in the Báb being put to death for heresy, and thousands of his followers being killed.

The founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, had been a Bábi and supported the Báb in his claim to be the returned Twelfth Imám. Contemporary Muslims in Iran regularly confuse Bahá'u'lláh with the Báb, but many of them, especially the Shí'í clerics, correctly understand Bahá'ís to be claiming that the Twelfth Imám has already returned. In refuting this claim, the Shí'ís point out that there has not been a final apocalyptic battle with evil, the final Day of Judgement has not occurred, and that therefore the Bahá'ís are guilty of a preposterous, heretical lie.

The Doctrine of Taqlid

Bahá'u'lláh taught that the clergy is no longer needed, and that the seeking of spiritual truth should now be an individual pursuit. In the past, when few people had an education or could read, the

clergy was necessary to interpret the prophet's message to the people. But in the modern world, Bahá'u'lláh asserted, the human race has moved beyond the need for this type of assistance. Thus, the Bahá'í Faith has no clergy, although it does have democratically elected office-holders who perform administrative functions at the local, national and international levels.

This teaching of Bahá'u'lláh's directly challenges the Shí'í doctrine of taqlid. The word taqlid means imitation or emulation. According to this doctrine, the average man, in order to be sure that he obeys the details of Islámic law and ritual practice, needs a spiritual guide to imitate. It is members of the clergy who serve as these models. Among the clerics, in turn, there is a 'hierarchy of deference'³ with local mullahs imitating mujtahids who imitate ayatollahs. Bahá'u'lláh's claim that taqlid is no longer necessary or desirable has significant practical implications. Douglas Martin writes that if 'imitation of others is no longer the path to spiritual progress, the entire ecclesiastical structure and the vast system of endowments, benefices, and fees which sustains it no longer have a reason for existence'.⁴

Only a very small percentage of Muslim laymen in Iran know anything of the Bahá'í teachings regarding taqlid, but some Bahá'ís believe that these teachings are more important than any other factor in accounting for the hostility of the Shí'í clergy toward the Bahá'í Faith. One Bahá'í asserted that 'the financial thing, and the prestige of being a clergyman, is more important than the idea of Muhammad being the Seal of the Prophets'. Another Bahá'í said that for Shí'í clerics 'the most important thing is their own welfare. They don't care if the Twelfth Imám has come or will come - they don't care. They just want their job.' These comments are probably unfair, and reflect the low opinion that most Bahá'ís have of the Shí'í clergy. Nevertheless, the Bahá'í teachings regarding taqlid undoubtedly contribute to the hostility of the clergy toward the Bahá'í Faith.

Bahá'í Proselytizing

Bahá'ís are taught that one of their main responsibilities as Bahá'ís, and one of the essential requisites for their own spiritual growth, is

3. Moojan Momen, *An Introduction of Shí'í Islám*, Oxford, George Ronald 1985, P. 204.

4. Douglas Martin, *The Persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran 1844-1984*, Ottawa, The Association of Bahá'í Studies 1984, pp. 13-14.

teaching others about the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'ís are not supposed to force their views on others, but they are supposed to tactfully educate others regarding Bahá'í principles. Muslims, however, see Bahá'ís as excessively oriented toward converting others, and this is resented. It is one of the reasons why many Muslims avoid personal contact with Bahá'ís, and why they especially want their children to shun Bahá'ís.⁵

One reason why Bahá'í proselytizing is seen by Muslim clerics as such a threat is because the idiom of the Bahá'í Faith is very close to that of Islám. As has been pointed out by Michael M. J. Fisher, this makes the Bahá'í Faith potentially appealing to Muslims, and it tends to deny the 'normal construction of significance that Muslims place on their idiom'.⁶

Mahdur al-damm

Resentment regarding Bahá'í efforts to proselytize is especially strong in Iran because of Muslim attitudes toward those who leave Islám for another faith. Devout Muslims believe that Islám contains all the spiritual guidance that the human race will ever need. Therefore, to convert from Islám to any other faith is considered apostasy, and a crime against God that is worthy of death. Such individuals are considered mahdur al-damm (those whose blood may be shed with impurity).⁷

Although a significant minority of Bahá'ís in Iran have been converted to the Bahá'í Faith from Christianity, the Jewish Faith, or from Zoroastrianism, the great majority of Bahá'ís in Iran are from Muslim backgrounds. They, or their ancestors, were converted from Islám. The fact that Bahá'ís are seen by Muslims in Iran as apostates who have turned their backs on God and on Islám certainly contributes to the hostility of Muslims toward Bahá'ís.

This hostility is strongly directed against recent converts from Islám to the Bahá'í Faith. One of the Bahá'í interviewees in this study had left

5. During the time of the late Shah there was a fairly common belief that Bahá'ís used money to bribe Muslims into becoming Bahá'ís – a charge denied by the Bahá'ís.

6. Michael M.J. Fisher, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1980, p. 187.

7. For a discussion of the Islámic law of apostasy, see Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, 'The Islamic Law of Apostasy and Its Modern Applicability'. *Religion* 16:3 (July 1986), pp.197-224.

Islám for the Bahá'í Faith as an adult, as had his parents and siblings. Their home was looted and burned to the ground by their neighbors. He commented: 'During the revolution, people who were born Muslim and became Bahá'í suffered more than those who were born into a Bahá'í family. And that had to do with their conversion. Those who were born in Bahá'í homes were considered lost people born to lost families. But, "You Muslims - why did you do that?"'

These five religious factors are fundamental in explaining the hostility of Iranian Muslims toward Bahá'ís. Their importance is underscored by the fact that it has been the Muslim clergy that has been most responsible in Iran for promoting anti-Bahá'í views and for inciting anti-Bahá'í acts. Whenever the clergy has been more powerful and influential in Iranian life, Bahá'ís have suffered. It is true that the governments of the Qajar and Pahlavi shahs also initiated acts of persecution against Bahá'ís, but these governments would have had little motive for attacking Bahá'ís had it not been for the fact that the clergy was a powerful anti-Bahá'í force whose favor needed to be curried, and for the fact that the clergy had made anti-Bahá'í acts politically popular.⁸

Even though religious factors are at the heart of the hostility in Iran toward Bahá'ís and toward the Bahá'ís Faith, there have been a number of other factors that have contributed to the hostility. These other factors are categorized here under the headings 'political factors', 'economic factors', and 'socio-cultural factors.'

POLITICAL FACTORS

Bahá'í Faith Seen as Political Movement

Since Muslims consider Bahá' u' lláh to be an impostor and Bahá'ís to be infidels, they do not consider the Bahá'í Faith to be a true religion. Instead, they a great many Iranian Muslims see the Bahá'í Faith as a political movement that was inspired by foreign imperialists for the purpose of bringing disunity to Iran. The British are generally blamed for starting the Bahá'í Faith. Many Muslims believe that the Bahá'ís in Iran have spied for the British and in other ways promoted British interests or, more recently, American or Israeli interests. Bahá'ís

8. Fisher, p. 187.

vehemently deny these charges, and objective observers consider them extremely implausible.⁹

Because of all the foreign meddling in Iran, Iranians tend naturally to see foreign political conspiracies everywhere. For example, Richard W. Cottam has recently pointed out that many Iranians believe that the Islámic revolution 'as it evolved was a direct product of external machinations, particularly from the CIA'.¹⁰ This tendency to see themselves as the victims of conspiracies is also something that is promoted by the Shí'í Faith. It is part of what might be called a Shí'í world view, and reflects the experiences of Shí'ís in previous centuries of being persecuted by Sunnis.¹¹

Baha' is Seen as Allies of the Shah

The tendency of Iranian Muslims to see conspiracies also results in them readily believing the accusation that the Bahá'ís had been political allies of the Shah. The believability of this claim is increased by two facts, the first of which is that Bahá'ís did not actively oppose the Shah. An important tenet of the Bahá'í Faith forbids its members to engage in partisan political activity either in support of, or in opposition to, the existing government. Just before and during the revolution, the country was so polarized that any group not actively opposing the Shah was viewed as supporting the Shah.

The second fact that makes this accusation against the Bahá'ís believable is that the Shah placed Bahá'ís in some important civil service positions. The Shah's personal physician was a Bahá'í, as was the Shah's pilot. The head of the national airlines was a Bahá'ís, as were high officials in other important agencies such as the Seven Year Plan Organization, the Ministry of Education, and the army's purchasing department.

Apparently the main reason why the Shah placed Bahá'ís in these key positions was because he trusted them not to plot behind his back

9. See, for example, Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions* Cambridge. Cambridge University Press 1987, p. 179; Minority Rights Group, *The Baha'is of Iran*, New York, Minority Rights Group 1983, pp. 10-11.

10. Richard W. Cottam, 'Inside Revolutionary Iran,' *The Middle East Journal* 43:2 (Spring 1989), p. 181.

11. Momen, p. 237.

to overthrow him, and he trusted them not to participate in graft and corruption. Although this trust factor seems to have been the most important reason explaining these appointments, there may have been other factors as well. Because of their strong emphasis on academic excellence, Bahá'ís were often the best qualified candidates. Furthermore, the Shah may have seen Bahá'ís as sympathetic to his program to modernize Iran, a program that was referred to as the White Revolution.

At any rate, and for whatever reasons, the Shah did place a relatively few highly qualified Bahá'ís in key civil service positions, while at the same time his government, under his direction, discriminated against the great majority of Bahá'ís. Throughout the Shah's years in power, the majority of Bahá'ís were discriminated against for employment, not only in getting jobs at private companies owned by Muslims, but also in getting civil service positions. This was done with the full knowledge and approval of the Shah, and it was the Shah's secret police, SAVAK, that enforced these discriminatory rules.

Because of the Bahá'í belief that prohibits partisan political activity, the relatively few Bahá'ís appointed by the Shah confined their participation in his government to civil service positions that were not overtly political in nature. The correct meaning of this Bahá'í prohibition has been debated among Bahá'ís worldwide. In Iran it has been interpreted as meaning that they can not join a political party, engage in political campaigning, participate in any political movement, or hold an office that is clearly political in nature. As long as these guidelines were not violated, Bahá'ís could claim with a clear conscience that they were not politically involved in the Shah's regime.

These guidelines were generally followed quite rigidly. For example, one of the Bahá'í interviewees in this study held the position of Deputy Director of the Iran National Tourist Organization. At one point he was required to join the Shah's 'Resurgence Party'. Rather than do so, he resigned his post. A few Bahá'ís, including this particular individual, were offered ministerial positions, but turned them down because the positions were political in nature.¹²

12. Widely believed claims that Prime Minister Hoveida and high officials in SAVAK were Bahá'ís, or even that the Shah himself was a secret Bahá'í, are completely erroneous.

The vast majority of Muslims, however, know nothing of these restrictions that Bahá'ís have imposed upon themselves. Nor do they realize that the Shah's government discriminated against the majority of Bahá'ís. They merely saw that Bahá'ís, real or imagined, were in key positions in the Shah's administration, and they have concluded, with the encouragement of the clergy, that the Bahá'ís were political allies and supporters of the Shah.

ECONOMIC FACTORS

Economic Prosperity of Baha'í Community

Prior to the revolution the Bahá'í community in Iran was relatively prosperous. Despite the prevalence of poverty in Iran, almost no Bahá'ís were extremely poor. The overwhelming majority were middle class or upper-middle class. Factors contributing to the economic well being of the Bahá'í community prior to the revolution included their strong emphasis on education, the Bahá'í concept of 'work as worship',¹³ and the community's orientation toward mutual help.

It is very difficult to assess the degree to which jealousy and resentment of the prosperity of the Bahá'í community before the revolution contributed to Muslim hostility toward Bahá'ís, but it seems to have been of some importance for lower class and working class Muslims. These are the individuals who have generally been the most hostile toward Bahá'ís, and the ones most likely to participate in mob action against Bahá'ís and their property. Whenever they attack and destroy a Bahá'í home they virtually always loot it first, thus indicating perhaps a degree of covetousness for the personal property of Bahá'ís.¹⁴

Resentment Toward Baha'í Millionaires

Although only a tiny percentage of Bahá'ís were extremely wealthy, some of those few who achieved extreme wealth were very well known by the general public. One of these was Habib Sabet, who owned the

13. William Sears, *A Cry From the Heart: The Bahá'ís in Iran*, Oxford, George Ronald 1982, pp. 34-35.

14. The particular animosity of the lower and working class Muslims can be further explained by the fact that they have been especially influenced by the clergy and have had the greatest need for scapegoats.

first television station in Iran, the Pepsi-Cola franchise, and a number of other business ventures. Another was Hojabr Yazdani, an extremely wealthy Bahá'í financier who rode in chauffeured limousines, had private body guards, and wore ostentatious jewelry. The report of the Minority Rights Group described Yazdani as one 'with a reputation for questionable business dealings', who 'became extremely unpopular,' and whose banks 'were special targets in the 1978 riots'.¹⁵

There were, of course, far more Muslim than Bahá'í millionaires in Iran during the 1970s, but resentment and anger were directed more toward the Bahá'í millionaires. One Bahá'í interviewee commented: 'This is one of the reasons why people were bad to Bahá'ís, because they said that these (wealthy) Bahá'ís steal from us and they make these palaces. That was the only thing that Muslims in Tehran were talking about. It was something that was catching the eye of everyone.'

The conspicuous consumption of a few well known wealthy Bahá'ís also reinforced the belief that Bahá'ís were receiving special favors from the Shah. Thus, hostility toward Bahá'í millionaires influenced Muslim attitudes toward the whole Bahá'í community. This was especially true in Tehran.

SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

Baha'is Seen as too Westernized

Some Iranian Muslims, especially those who are both relatively well educated and religiously involved, have long felt that Bahá'ís are too westernized. For example, one well educated Muslim interviewee claimed that even back in the early 1950s when he was in high school and college in Tehran 'Bahá'ís were noted for wanting to westernize the whole society'. When asked if this was true of the Bahá'ís who he personally knew, he said: 'Yes'. They seemed to be almost worshipping the West, and it was almost unbearable at times. Bahá'ís were not the only ones who advocated that. There were also many others. But those who didn't want to make a wholesale change in our society and in our way of life really didn't like Bahá'ís.'

Referring to the 1960s, a Bahá'í interviewee commented that any practice or custom that was different from traditional Iranian Shí'í culture

15. Minority Rights Group, p. 10.

was seen as western. 'One of the customs of Bahá'ís, for example, is taking a shower or bath every day. But this was not a custom for the Muslims, and when they would learn that Bahá'ís take a shower or bath every day, they would say "You are westernized."'

Since the 1970s, hostility toward those who are seen as westernized has become much more widespread among the general population of Iran, thus strengthening the hostility toward Bahá'ís. Afsaneh Najmabadi has pointed out that by the 1970s in Iran, 'all political currents shared the outlook that corruption, moral and social, caused by foreign influence and domination, was at the heart of problems'. Westernized individuals were viewed 'not simply as un-Islámic, but more seriously as the fifth-columnists of "cultural imperialism"'.¹⁶

Bahá'ís Seen as Guilty of Immoral Practices

Because the West has been seen as the source of corruption and immorality, Iranian Muslims readily believe rumors about immoral Bahá'í practices, such as that Bahá'ís are sexually promiscuous and regularly commit incest. One Bahá'í interviewee said: 'The stories that the Muslim children have heard from their parents, all the wrong and awful things that children learn about the Bahá'ís - it is horrible. They say that (Bahá'í) brothers and sisters can be together (have sex), and that at the end of their parties they (the Bahá'ís) turn out the lights and the men and women are together.'

It is the poor and uneducated Muslims, who typically have little if any personal contact with Bahá'ís, who are most likely to believe these stories. They also typically believe that Bahá'ís are contemptuous of Islám and of the Qur'án, and that Bahá'ís newly converted from Islám must demonstrate this contempt by committing blasphemy against Islám.

Bahá'ís emphatically deny these rumors. They point out that the Bahá'í Faith denounces all premarital and extramarital sex as well as incest, and that the Bahá'í Faith is the only world religion other than Islám that recognizes Muhammad as a Messenger of God and the Qur'án as a divinely inspired book.

Bahá'ís believe that these rumors have generally been started by the Shí'í clerics to generate hatred against Bahá'ís. For example, one

16. Afsaneh Najmabadi, 'Iran's Turn to Islam: From Modernism to a Moral Order', *The Middle East Journal* 41:2 (Spring 1987), pp. 205 & 207.

Bahá'í, who had been a Muslim until his late teens, claimed that Shí'í clerics tell Muslims that "if you become a Bahá'í, first you have to burn the Qur'án. This individual asserted that clerics 'play with people's emotions according to their level. They go to the level of each group—what makes them the most irritated.'

Rumors about Bahá'í immorality are generally dismissed as ridiculous by those Muslim who have had very much personal contact with Bahá'ís, and they are also generally not believed by better educated Muslims. However, since a large percentage of the Iranian population has little education or contact with Bahá'ís' these rumors have been influential in promoting hostility toward Bahá'ís and the Bahá'í Faith.

Conclusion

Of the four categories of factors explaining the prejudice and discrimination against Bahá'ís in Iran (religious, political, economic, and socio-cultural), the religious factors have clearly been the most important and fundamental. The Bahá'í Faith violates cherished beliefs of devout Twelver Shí'ís, and thus it is seen by them as neither a legitimate independent religion nor as a legitimate sect of Shí'í Islám. The Shí'í clerics believe that if the Bahá'í Faith were allowed to grow and prosper, it would threaten the basic institutions of Shí'ism as well as the position and livelihood of the clergy. As a result, the clerics have been adamantly opposed to the Bahá'í Faith since its inception, and they have been successful in spreading their views to a great many Iranians.

Of the other factors, probably the political ones have been most important in the highly politicized environment of Iran during the 1970s and 1980s, with economic and socio-cultural factors following in that order. These other factors provide powerful weapons for use in denouncing Bahá'ís and in building up hostility toward them, but it is unlikely that they would have led to nearly as much prejudice and discrimination against Bahá'ís if the Bahá'í Faith was not already hated for religious reasons.

With Khomeini's death and with the establishment of a somewhat more moderate government, Iranian Bahá'ís are cautiously optimistic that the 1990s will be better for them than have been the 1980s, although they anticipate that they will continue to be subjected to varying degrees of prejudice and discrimination.