

# Towards a History of the Baha'i Community of Iran during the Reign of Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979)<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

With the spread of the Baha'i religion in Iran since its tumultuous birth in that country in the middle part of the nineteenth century, the persecution of its followers has been a part of Iranian history.<sup>2</sup> As Abbas Amanat has shown, during the Qajar period (1785-1925), anti-Babi pogroms and campaigns usually occurred during provincial or national crises such as those caused by harvest failures, famines, and epidemics. The Babis (and later Baha'is) served as scapegoats to cover the state's failure in relation to European economic and political intrusion. Drawing the attention of the public to the evils of this 'devious sect' served to consolidate the relationship between the Qajar government and the clergy.<sup>3</sup> With the rise of Reza

<sup>1</sup>I wish to thank Omid Ghaemmaghami for his editorial comments. I have used a modified version of the Library of Congress system of transliteration sans diacritical marks and underdots. For certain famous personalities (e.g., Mohammad Reza Shah), I have used the most common spelling of their names even if such spelling does not comply with the Library of Congress system of transliteration.

<sup>2</sup>For multiple articles on various aspects of the

Baha'i faith, see *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. "Baha'i Faith or Bahaism."

<sup>3</sup>For multiple articles on various aspects of the Baha'i faith, see *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. "Baha'i Faith or Bahaism."

<sup>3</sup>Abbas Amanat, "The Historical Roots of the Persecution of Babis and Baha'is in Iran," in *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies*, Dominic Brookshaw and Seena Fazel, eds. (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2007), 170-183.

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Shah to power, physical assaults, including murder, against Baha'is considerably decreased but did not cease. In 1926, angry mobs killed somewhere between eight to twelve Baha'is in Jahrum. The attacks were apparently instigated by a *majlis* representative who sought to gain favor with anti-Baha'i religious leaders in order to secure reelection. The Baha'is complained to the local and national authorities to obtain redress but were denied. This was the last incident of mass killing of Baha'is during Reza Shah's reign.<sup>4</sup> Although immunity from physical attacks was provided in the closing years of Reza Shah's rule, the government forbade Baha'i meetings, closed Baha'i centers and Baha'i schools, and harassed Baha'is on matters concerning census forms, marriage certificates, and birth certificates. It also dismissed some Baha'i government employees and stripped several Baha'is serving in the army of their rank.<sup>5</sup> The motivation behind such harsh measures might lie in Reza Shah's determination "to subordinate all other loyalties to allegiance to his person,"<sup>6</sup> or perhaps in his intention to avoid unnecessary friction with the ulama, that is, friction beyond what was inevitable for the implementation of his "modernizing" ideas. With Reza Shah's forced abdication and Mohammad Reza Shah's accession to the throne in 1941, the influence of the ulama resurged, and a new era began. Historical narratives published in Iran after the Islamic Revolution usually depict the Baha'is in the Pahlavi period as living an imagined state of comfort and bliss, partaking of privileges denied to other citizens.<sup>7</sup> Careful study of the primary sources, however, paints a different picture. Moving away from simplistic and monolithic narratives, this paper will investigate the multi-layered, multi-faceted history of the Baha'i community of Iran during the reign of the last Pahlavi monarch. I will argue that the situation of Baha'is during Mohammad Reza Shah's reign (1941-1979) went through different phases. The first phase, from 1941 through 1955, was a period characterized by physical danger, during which Baha'is were scapegoated in the interactions among the government, the clerics and the people, and experienced several bloody incidents, the culmination of which was

<sup>4</sup>Mina Yazdani, "Religious Contentions in Modern Iran, 1881-1941" (PhD Diss. University of Toronto, 2011), 229-230.

<sup>5</sup>Yazdani, "Religious Contentions in Modern Iran," 237-38.

<sup>6</sup>Douglas Martin, "The Persecution of the Baha'is of Iran, 1844-1984," *Baha'i Studies*, 12/13 (1984), 20.

<sup>7</sup>In the last decade or so, in addition to numerous polemical works, books have been published in

the Islamic Republic of Iran which in the guise of academic studies reproduce and reinforce the government's official narrative about the life of Baha'is under Mohammad Reza Shah. Examples include: Mas'ud Kuhistaninijad, *Ruhaniyyat –Baha'iyān (nimah-yi avval-i sal-i 1334* (Tehran: markaz-i asnad-i Inqilab-i Islami, 1386); Suraya Shamsavari, *Asnad-i fa'aliyyat-i Baha'iyān dar dawrah-yi Mohammad Reza Shah* (Tehran: markaz-i asnad-i Inqilab-i Islami, 1378); Leila Chamankhah, *Baha'iyat va rijim-i Pahlavi* (Tehran: Nigah-i Mu'asir, 1391).

the 1955 anti-Baha'i campaign and its aftermaths. The second phase, from the late 1950s to around 1977, marked almost two decades of relative respite from physical attacks, during which Baha'is enjoyed more security than before, without ever being officially recognized as a religious community and while their existence as Baha'is was essentially ignored or denied. The last two years of the reign of the Shah comprised the third phase, the revival of a bloody period. It must be added that given the rather long span of the period under study, and the multi-faceted nature of the subject, this article can do no more than provide an overview.

### **The 1940s and Early 1950s: Tumultuous and Bloody Years**

The 1940s and early 1950s were tumultuous, at times, even bloody years, for the Baha'i community of Iran. After the relative suppression of their activities in the last years of Reza Shah's reign, the mid-1940s coincided with new plans in the Baha'i community for pioneering (migrating to places with fewer or no Baha'is) and propagating their faith, inside as well as outside Iran.<sup>8</sup> The 1940s also witnessed the re-empowerment of the Shi'i clerics who largely viewed Baha'is as enemies of Islam, the relative weakness of the central government under the young and inexperienced king, and a judiciary system unwilling or incapable of protecting the Baha'is. The combination of these factors exposed Baha'is to episodes of severe persecution.

When the young Mohammad Reza Shah (d. 1980) acceded to the throne in 1941, among his strategies to consolidate power was appeasing the clerics.<sup>9</sup> The astute politician, Muhammad Ali Furughi,<sup>10</sup> told journalists in his press conference as the young Shah's first prime minister, that "religion must also be supported" (*bi din ham himayat bayad kard*).<sup>11</sup> Furughi played a pivotal role in strengthening the

<sup>8</sup>The first organized plan for the expansion of the Baha'i faith began on 11 October 1946 (19 Mihr 1324). See *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. "Baha'i Faith or Bahaism v. The Baha'i Community of Iran."

<sup>9</sup>On Mohammad Reza Shah, see Gholam R. Afkhami, *The Life and Time of the Shah* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009); 'Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York: Palgrave and Mcmillan, 2011); Homa Katouzian, *The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 229-287. On the Shah appeasing the clerics, Milani, *The Shah*, 99.

<sup>10</sup>On Furughi's role in the transition of power/

kingship from RezaShah to his son see Katouzian, *The Persians*, 230-231.

<sup>11</sup>[Ahmad Kasravi], *Sarnivisht-i Iran chi kha-had bud?* 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Tehran: Chapkhanah Urdibihisht, 1324), 18. Available at [www.kasravi.info/ketabs/sarnevsh-e-iran.pdf](http://www.kasravi.info/ketabs/sarnevsh-e-iran.pdf) (accessed 25 June 2013). Writing four years into Mohammad Reza Shah's reign, Kasravi, who published the book under the name of "An Iranian," (*yik Irani*), went on to say that it was clear what Furughi meant by "supporting religion" and then blamed all the subsequent administrations, the contemporary newspapers and the Tudah Party for their support of the clerics.

new monarch in the wake of the forced abdication of Reza Shah, and acted as an experienced advisor to the apprehensive young Shah. Supporting religion meant first and foremost backing the Shi‘i clerics. Fearful of the spread of Communism in Iran, and wary of experienced and strong politicians such as Ahmad Qavam (d. 1955), the Shah forged strong ties with the clerics, the most prominent of whom was Ayatollah al-‘Uzma Haji Aqa Husayn Burujirdi (d. 1961), the sole *marja‘-i taqlid* of the Iranian Shi‘is between 1947 and 1961, who, as has been demonstrated elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> was forcefully and unabashedly opposed to the Baha‘i religion. The Shah and the Ayatollah would have several meetings, during which Burujirdi expressed his demands. Burujirdi played a key role in revitalizing the *Hawza* in Qum and led the seminary from the 1940s. In his position as head of the seminary, he sent seminary student to different parts of Iran with the aim of suppressing the Baha‘is.<sup>13</sup> What one of these emissaries, Ahmad Shahrudi, has recorded of Burujirdi’s words when dispatching him and two others, provides a possible explanation of the sporadic cases of murder of Baha‘is in the 1940s and early 1955 in different parts of Iran. It also reflects the sense of power and immunity vis-à-vis the law that the Grand Ayatollah felt: “Go and kill them (Baha‘is)! If you are able to, then do so and kill them! Kill and set your minds at ease (*bikushid va itminan dashtih bashid*).”<sup>14</sup> Along with the re-empowerment of the ‘ulama, many Islamic societies were formed, almost all with anti-Baha‘i agendas, with many followers among the laity, not only in Tehran, but also in other cities such as Qum, Shiraz, and Mashhad.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Mina Yazdani, “Islamic Ecumenism in Mid-Twentieth Century Iran: a Reaction to a Messianic Movement?” in the panel, “Messianism in Iranian Islam: From Conceptions to Re-Conceptions,” *The Tenth Biennial Iranian Studies Conference*, Montreal, Canada, 9 August, 2014.

<sup>13</sup>Even before coming to such prominence, Ayatollah Burujirdi had managed, on occasions, to suppress Baha‘is. Once in 1927, officials dismissed a Baha‘i from his job as the assistant to the head of a local branch of a governmental office (birth registration office, *Idarah-yi sabt-i ahval*) in Burujird, and expelled Baha‘is from that city, as the Ayatollah had wished. Mohammad Husayn ‘Alavi Tabataba‘i, *Khatirat-i zindigani-yi Ayatollah al-‘Uzma Aqa-yi Burujirdi* (Tehran: Ittila‘at, 1341/1962), 36. See also the Ayatollah’s biography on his website *Paygah ittila‘-rasani-yi Hazrat-i Ayatollah Burujirdi*,

[www.broujirdi.org/content/view/12/140/](http://www.broujirdi.org/content/view/12/140/) (accessed 25 June 2013).

<sup>14</sup>Ghulam-Riza Karbaschi, *Tarikh-i shafahi-i inqilab-i Islami (tarikh-i hawzah-yi ‘ilmiyyah-yi Qum)*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Tehran: Markaz-i Asnad-i Inqilab-i Islami, 1380/2001), 1:162.

<sup>15</sup>See Markaz-i Asnad-i Riyasat-i Jumhuri, *Asnadi as anjumanha va majami‘-i mazhabi dar dawrah-yi Pahlavi* (Tehran: Saziman-i Chap va Intisharat-i Vizarat-i Farhang va Irshad-i Islami, 2002/1381). For a thorough study of such societies and their goals, see Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, “Baha‘isitizi va Islamgara‘i dar Iran,” *Iran Nameh* 19, nos. 1– 2 (Winter/Spring 2001), 79– 124; idem, “Anti- Baha‘ism and Islamism in Iran,” trans. Omid Ghaemmaghami, in *The Baha‘is of Iran: Socio- historical Studies*, ed. Dominic Parviz Brookshaw and Sena B. Fazel (London: Routledge, 2008), 200– 31.

In the first three years of Mohammad Reza shah's reign, the persecutions ranged from expelling Baha'is from cities and villages; looting, raiding, plundering, stoning and burning down homes and places of work; and uprooting trees and the like. While harsh and brutal, these persecutions seldom involved acts of murder.<sup>16</sup> Rather than proper prosecution and punishment of the offenders and their instigators, the government issued a circular that officially placed restrictions on Baha'i activities and prohibited Baha'i governmental employees from "teaching" their faith (which, for the most part, simply meant openly speaking about it).<sup>17</sup> The government's lack of prosecution, coupled with the circular, emboldened the religious zealots. As a result, the severity of the attacks increased. In Shahrud, following a full month of tension and threats, mobs attacked, looted and burned the homes and shops of Baha'is and brutally murdered three Baha'is in August 1944 (Murdad 1323).<sup>18</sup> This was the beginning of more than a decade of episodes of sporadic killing of Baha'is coinciding with dispatches of clerics by Ayatollah Burujirdi to teach Islam in villages and towns. In the summer of 1947/1326, the young and successful engineer Abbas Shahidzadah and a fellow Baha'i, Habib Allah Hushmand, were murdered in Shahi and Sarvistan respectively; in 1949/1328, Dr. Sulayman Birjis was brutally murdered in Kashan,<sup>19</sup> and in 1950/1329, Ghulam Reza Akhzari and his son Nur Allah were killed near Yazd and Bahram Rawhani was murdered in Taft. More murders followed: in 1951/1330, in Najafabad, Muhammad Kayvani; in 1952/1331, in the village of Ramjin, near Qazvin, Nur al-Din Fatheazam; and in 1953/1332, in Luristan, Rahman Kulayni (these all being documented murders).<sup>20</sup> In most of these cases, Baha'is were scapegoated during times of political or social crisis. In most instances, one or more clerics had instigated Shiites to commit acts of violence.

Apart from the clerics, there were also lay anti-Baha'i individuals who abused their power in the service of their prejudices. It could not, for example, have been an

<sup>16</sup>Even then sporadic cases of murder of Baha'is happened: in 1941/1320 in Ivil, Mazandaran, Mr. Jazbani, and in 1943/1322 in Ghahrugh, a village near Shahr-i Kurd, 'Abd al-Husayn Rizvani. See Turaj Amini, *Asnad-i Baha'iyān-i Iran, az sal-i 1320 ta payān-i 1331* (Stockholm, Sweden: Baran, 2012), 3-4.

<sup>17</sup>See the text of the circular in Amini, *Asnad 1320 ta payān-i 133*, 491-92.

<sup>18</sup>For a firsthand account of the events in Shahrud, see: Y.P. *Haqayiq-i guftani, dar pi-yramun-i hadasah-yi nangin-i Shahrud va kushtar-i Baha'iyān bih dast-i Shi'ayan* (Tehran: Parcham, 1945/1324). For primary sources

pertaining to these events, see Amini, *Asnad 1320 ta payān-i 1331*, 506-511, 516-527; 535-617; Maymandinijad, "Vaqi 'ah-'i Shahrud," *Mard-i Imruz*, 26 (27 Murdad 1323).

<sup>19</sup>For a detailed study of the murder of Dr. Birjis, see: Nasir Muhajir, "Kard-ajin kardan-i Dr. Birjis," *Baran* (Spring and Summer 1387/2008), 10-24; See also: Mousa Amanat, *Baha'iyān-i Kashan*, ed. Noura Amanat-Samimi (Madrid, Spain: Nehal, 2012), 212-216.

<sup>20</sup>For the relevant documents see Amini, *Asnad 1320 ta payān-i 1331*, 742-753, and 580-83, 591, 594.

accident that the same police officer named Fatimi was the head of the police office in 1944 in Shahrud, in 1947 in Shahi and in 1949 in Kashan, when each of the above-mentioned episodes occurred without any police protection. Fatimi is reported to have ignored the appeals when the early signs of dangers had been observed and reported.<sup>21</sup> Another example of the abuse of power by lay anti-Baha'i individuals is the unlawful imposition of an exorbitant tax, much higher than the actual value of the relevant properties, on the Baha'i community of Iran in the 1970s, mostly as a result of the anti-Baha'i attitudes of those in charge, particularly in the Ministry of Finance.<sup>22</sup>

In all of these cases, Baha'is filed complaints via legal channels and requested investigations. Officials seldom responded to the complaints, and investigations, when carried out, placed the blame at the feet of Baha'is for provoking such attacks by speaking openly about their religion.<sup>23</sup> In some cases, officials refused to investigate the case because the complaint had been filed by the Baha'i institutions and the authorities believed responding to the complaint would be tantamount to officially recognizing the Baha'i institutions.<sup>24</sup> Murderers, often acting collectively,

<sup>21</sup>For example, immediately before the murder of Dr. Birjis, when Baha'is in Kashan met Fatimi to express their worries about the possible consequences of fiery speeches delivered on the pulpit by a cleric who sought to instigate people against the "morally corrupt" Baha'is whose blood could be shed with impunity, he only assured them that nothing would happen. Ruh Allah Mihrabkhani, "Shahadat-i ductur Birjis," *Ahang-i Badi'*, no. 17, 4 (Isfand 1328/ Feb. Mar. 1950), 4. For his support of the assailants in the 1323 Shahrud events, see Nasir Pakdaman, *Qatl-i Kasravi*, 2nd ed. (Sweden: Afsanah, 1998/1337), 86-87.

<sup>22</sup>Cyrus 'Ala'i, "Tarikhchah-'i maliyat bar irs-i Hazrat-i Shoghi Rabbani vali-i amr-i Baha'i," manuscript in private hands. An abstract of this article has been published in Cyrus 'Ala'i, "Majara-yi amlak-i Shoghi Effandi," in *Iran dar 'Asr-i Pahlavi*, vol. 12, ed. Mustafa Alamuti (London: Paka Press, 1992):232-38.

<sup>23</sup>See for example the 7 Bahman 1326 /8 Jan. 1948 letter from the Minister of Interior to the governor-general of Fars, and the governors of a number of other cities. Amini, *Asnad 1320 ta payan-i 1331*, 796-97. Also see the letter written by the Minister of Interior to the Prime Minister Sa'id on 23 Khurdad 1323/13 June 1944

in Amini, *Asnad 1320 ta payan-i 1331*, 482-83.

<sup>24</sup>For example, on 10 Bahman 1328/30 Jan. 1950, five days before the murder of Dr. Birjis, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Iran, the governing body of that community, wrote to the Police Commissioner to draw his attention to the impending dangers for Baha'is living in Kashan and some other parts of Iran, and to request the police's intervention, *Akhbar Amri*, no. 10 (1328/1950), 90-91. Rather than providing protection, the result of this and similar complaints made after the murder of Dr. Birjis was that, Asad Allah 'Alam (d.1978/1357), the Minister of the Interior, on 1 Isfand 1328/20 February 1955 wrote to the Prime Minister, Mohammad Sa'id, expressing concerns that official letters from the "Assembly of Baha'is" to the government offices would lend them "official recognition" thereby "instigating the prejudice of Muslims." Therefore, 'Alam suggested to the Prime Minister that the Assemblies must be "categorically shut down." See Amini, *Asnad 1320 ta payan-i 1331*, 860. Also, the governor-general of Fars, Izz al-Mamalik Ardalan (d. 1987/1366) in the midst of the persecution of Baha'is in Sarvestan, frankly stated that he would "tear up" any letters of complaint written by a "Baha'i Assembly" and would

were never punished. For example, the killers of Dr. Birjis, who had collectively confessed to his murder, were all exonerated due to “the lack of evidence.”<sup>25</sup> In rare instances where the government arrested someone, collective action by a number of clerics exerted pressure on the government to release the culprits.<sup>26</sup> In one exceptional instance where the killer of two Baha’i was put on trial and received a death sentence, the verdict was never carried out: in 1951, Muhammad Husayn Ansari confessed to the murder of two Baha’is, fifty-nine year old Ghulamriza Akhzari and his son Nur Allah. When Ayatollah Burujirdi heard that a Muslim was set to be executed for having murdered two Baha’is, he became extremely angry and sent his protégé, the then young Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, to the Shah to request a stay of execution.<sup>27</sup> This he did, as the accounts record.<sup>28</sup>

In other instances, the fact that the murderers usually acted collectively, and were supported by the radical Islamist group, Fada’iyan-i Islam, spared them from punishment. When the seventeen people who had killed Fatheazam were on trial, the Fada’iyan-i Islam gathered large sums of money from the Bazaar to hire a seasoned attorney to defend the killers. Twenty members of the terror organization attended the court hearing and threatened the family of the deceased outside the courtroom. A judicial system unwilling to oppose the Fada’iyan and unmotivated to defend the rights of the murdered Baha’is, exonerated the murderers who proceeded to collectively celebrate their victory in the company of the prominent cleric Muhammad Bihbahani.<sup>29</sup>

only pay attention to complaints coming from individuals without any mention of the name Baha’i. Aman Allah Ardalan (Izz al-Mamalik), *Khatirat-i Hajj Izz al-Mamalik Ardalan: zindigi dar dawran-i shish padishah* (Tehran: Khurshid, 1993/1372), 315-16, quoted in Muhajir, “Kard-ajin,” 18.

<sup>25</sup>For details, see Muhajir, “Kard-ajin,” 20-21.

<sup>26</sup>For the role Ayatollahs Burujirdi, Kashani, Bihbahani and a number of other clerics played in freeing the murderers of Dr. Birjis, see Rasul Ja’fariyan, *Jaryanha va sazimanha-yi mazhabi-siyasi-i Iran, az ruyi kar amadan-i Mohammad Reza Shah ta piyruzi-i Inqilab-i Islami, salha-yi 1320-1357*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Qum: published by the author, 2006/1385), 162. Ja’fariyan’s source is the memoirs of one of the murderers: “Khatirat-i Gulsurkhi,” *Yad*, no. 6, 45-46.

<sup>27</sup>See Husayn ‘Ali Muntaziri, *Matn-i kamil-i Khatirat-i Ayat Allah Husayn ‘Ali Muntaziri bi hamrah-i Payvast ha* (n.p.: Union of Iranian Editors in Europe, 1379/2001), 94; *Khatirat-i Mas’udi Khomeini* Javad Imami, ed. (Tehran: Markaz-i Inqilab-i Islami, 1381/2002), 221; Mohammad Taghi Afnan, *Bigunahan*, Manuscript in private hands, 245-249. Ja’fariyan, *Jaryanha*, 155.

<sup>28</sup>In the biography of Ayatollah Burujirdi there is mention of this murder and the rescue of the murderer by the intervention of Ayatollah Burujirdi, without including the latter’s sending of Ayatollah Khomeini to the Shah on this issue. See: ‘Alavi Tabataba’i, *Khatirat-i zindigani*, 81-85.

<sup>29</sup>Ahmad GulMohammadi, *Jam’iyyat-i fada’iyan-i Islam bi ravayat-i asnad* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Inqilab-i Islami, 1382/2003), 2:467, document number 253.

While most of these murders did not attract much public attention, the murder of Dr. Birjis did, perhaps because of his prominence as a physician serving the deprived people of a small city, the bold way in which the murderers declared what they had done, and the judiciary's blatant disregard for justice and the rule of law. An unprecedented wave of sympathy towards the victim swept over the country. The Society of the Physicians of Iran (Kanun Pizishkan-i Iran) wrote a letter to the Shah requesting that an investigation be opened and the culprits to be punished. Several newspapers and magazines wrote articles on the events. And Iranian students in Switzerland sent a cablegram to the State, attracting their attention to the international repercussions of such "savage" acts.<sup>30</sup> It was perhaps in an attempt to dilute the sympathy, that shortly after, Baha'is faced the baseless accusation of murdering a Muslim woman and her five children in Abarqu in 1949/1328. The deliberate calumny led to the arrest, unfair trial and years of imprisonment of a number of innocent Baha'is, the death of one of them in prison, and the execution of an innocent Muslim who the authorities refused to believe was a Muslim (and not a Baha'i), despite his many pleas.<sup>31</sup>

After the coup d'état of 1953, with the Shah indebted to prominent clerics such as Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim Kashani and Ayatollah Muhammad Bihbahani for their support during the coup, clerics were given greater latitude to persecute Baha'is. According to one account, in an attempt to show his gratitude to Ayatollah Kashani, the Shah sent the high-ranking officer Batmanqilich to ask if he had any specific requests. The Ayatollah called for the Baha'i Center in Tehran to be demolished.<sup>32</sup> Ayatollah Burujirdi, who had finally taken the Shah's side in 1953, likewise demanded from the Shah to suppress the Baha'is, as discussed below.

### **The 1955 Anti-Baha'i Campaign and its Aftermaths**

Ayatollah Burujirdi's own account of his interactions with the Shah in the lead up to the 1955 anti-Baha'i campaign highlights court-clerics relationship at the time and the ways in which Baha'is served as pawns in this interaction:

<sup>30</sup>For all the relevant documents, see Suhrab Nikusifat, *Sarkub va kushtar-i digarandishan-i mazhabi dar Iran, vol. 1, az Safaviyyah ta Inqilab-i Islami* (Alzette, Luxembourg: Payam, 2009/1388), 397-407.

<sup>31</sup>For details, see Afnan, *Bigunahan*, 51-214; Nikusifat, *Sarkub va kushtar*, 1:414-38; Amini, *Asnad az 1320 ta payan-i sal-i 1331*, 900-915

and passim.

<sup>32</sup>Ghulamriza Musavvar-i Rahmani, *Kuhnah sarbaz: khatirat-i siyasi va nizami-yi sarhang-i sitad, Ghulamriza Musavvar-i Rahmani*, (1374/1995 repr., Tehran: Mu'assasah-'i khadamat-i farhangi-'i rasa, 1366/1987), 363-364.



Whenever I met with the Shah, I emphasized that he must put an end to [the activities of] this misled and misleading (*zallah-yi muzillah*) sect. [The Shah] promised [he would do so], but did not keep his word. In a subsequent visit, I pressured him [to act]. He responded: “I am unable to do so. You must help [me]. I said: “What authority do I have? All the power is in your hands.” He responded: “Ask people to write and complain. When the complaints are forwarded to me, I will have just cause to act.” It was not a bad idea. After that visit, we urged people in various provinces to write letters of complaint against (the Baha’is). When Ramadan arrived, we told Mr. Falsafi to give speeches attacking and condemning them. Because of these steps, the Shah ordered Batmanqilich<sup>33</sup> to destroy the Hazirat al-Quds (the national Baha’i center in Tehran).<sup>34</sup>

The rest of the 1955 story is well-known.<sup>35</sup> The Shah sanctioned<sup>36</sup> Burujirdi’s disciple, the skilled orator Hujjat al-Islam Falsafi to deliver a series of fiery

<sup>33</sup>Major-general (*sarlashkar*) Nader Batmanqilich (d. 1991), the head of the Iranian Army at the time.

<sup>34</sup>Mujtaba Ahmadi, et al., eds., *Chashm va chiragh-i marja’iyyat: musahibahha-yi vizhah-i majallah-i hawzah ba shagirdan-i Ayatollah Burujirdi* (Qum: Daftar-i Tablighat-i Islami-i hawzah-i ‘ilmiyyah’-i Qum, 1379/2000), 55.

<sup>35</sup>What is less known, however, is Mahdi Ha’iri’s account of the role played by Khomeini in the process. Ha’iri, a philosopher and politician born to a high-ranking clerical family, related by marriage to Ayatollah Khomeini’s son and a student and close friend of the Ayatollah, reported a critical meeting between Ayatollah Khomeini and the Shah, shortly before or during the 1955 anti-Baha’i campaign. According to Ha’iri, Khomeini recounted that he was sent by Ayatollah Burujirdi to ask the Shah to crack down on the Baha’is. Khomeini told the Shah: “His Majesty, the late king, your father, tied this wayward and misguided sect [*firqah-yi zallah*] in the stable; the people of Iran expect the same from you now.” According to Ha’iri, Khomeini was happy with the outcome of the meeting. See Habib Lajvardi, ed. *Khatirat-i duktur Mahdi Ha’iri Yazdi (ustad-i falsafah, farzand-i bunyanguzar-i hawzah-yi ‘ilmi-i Qum)* (Tehran: Nader, 1381/2002), 56-57. Historian Ervand Abrahamian considers the anti-Baha’i campaigns waged by the Pahlavis

in the 1930s and again in the 1950s as evidence of their espousal of Shiism. Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), 19.

<sup>36</sup>Several hypotheses have been advanced on the reasons why the Shah gave consent to the suppression of the Baha’is, in 1955. Most agree that he sought to appease the ulama. On the one hand, the Shah was indebted to prominent fiercely anti-Baha’i clerics like Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim Kashani and Sayyid Mohammad Bihbahani for having supported the 1953 Coup. On the other, he was wary of Soviet and Communist influence at the height of the Cold War and wanted to align the country closer to the West to ensure the survival of his reign. He planned, after the anti-Baha’i campaign, to join the American sponsored Baghdad Pact, later known as Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), [a mutual defense and economic cooperation pact among Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan, with the participation of the United Kingdom and later the United States as associate members] which he suspected would likely trigger the opposition of the ulama to what they commonly perceived as a growing dependency upon the West and the threat of increasing Western cultural influence. Moreover, he “had already accepted a proportion of oil revenues below the level nationalists considered respectable.” Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in*

speeches against the Baha'is, which were broadcast at noon every day during the month of Ramadan when religious fervour was at a peak. Falsafi's talks unleashed a wave of anti-Baha'i violence across the country. In smaller towns and localities, incited mobs raided, plundered and burned houses and other buildings belonging to Baha'is, destroyed Baha'i cemeteries, threatened many Baha'is with rape and murder (actually raping some), forced many Baha'is into mosques in order to force them to recant their faith, and coerced others to publicly declare their recantation in the press. Some children and youth were expelled from school. Many government employees were fired.<sup>37</sup> In some localities, such as Najafabad, the clerics forbade trading with Baha'is.<sup>38</sup> In others, they separated women from their husbands and forced them to marry Muslims.<sup>39</sup> In Tehran, the army occupied the Baha'i Center, and high ranking military officials and clerics jointly demolished its dome,<sup>40</sup> an action some contemporaries interpreted as the state's way of preventing a full-blown Baha'i massacre.<sup>41</sup> When rumours spread that the state would not protect Baha'is from assaults, mobs killed seven Baha'is in the village of Hurmuzak on 28 July 1955.<sup>42</sup> Prior to the event, Baha'is in Hurmuzak had made frequent appeals to the authorities. The law-enforcement officers present in the village not only did not assist them but in fact participated in the persecution.<sup>43</sup>

*Iran*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford, UK: Oneworld, 2008), 239. The government was also facing serious economic problems and the anti-Baha'i campaign could distract attention from those problems. Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy-State Relations in the Pahlavi Period* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1980), 77. Michael Fischer also interprets the events within the context of the economic difficulties that ensued after the 1953 coup and the government's effort to buy off right-wing clerics. Michael M.J. Fischer, *Iran, from Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 187. A different explanation has been offered by Sir Denis Wright, the British Charge d'Affaires in 1955. He states that the Shah was blackmailed to sanction the persecution of the Baha'is because the ulama had pictures of Queen Soraya in a bikini and newspaper accounts of an alleged son of the Shah born to a "well-known American socialite" and were threatening to publicize these and raise an uproar. Therefore, the Shah agreed that they could attack the Baha'is. Milani, *The Shah*, 199.

Milani's source is "The Memoirs of Sir Denis Wright, 1911-1971," 1:280.

<sup>37</sup>Shoghi Effendi, *Tawqi' 113* (manuscript in private hands), provides a summary of the events.

<sup>38</sup>See Muntaziri, *Matn-i kamil-i Khatirat*, 94-95.

<sup>39</sup>Ja'fariyan refers to one such instance without specifying its time. See Ja'fariyan, *Jaryanha*, 373-374.

<sup>40</sup>Tavakoli-Targhi, "Bahaisitizi," 104-10 ; Akhavi, *Religion and Politics*, 76-87.

<sup>41</sup>Hishmat Shahriari, Interview, *A Quiet Genocide*, [quietgenocide.com/index.php/component/k2/117](http://quietgenocide.com/index.php/component/k2/117) (accessed 25 Oct. 2014).

<sup>42</sup>See the 14 Dey 1344 (5 Jan. 1956) deliberations of the *majlis* on the event in *Ruznamah-i rasmi-i kishvar-i shahanshahi-i Iran*: [goo.gl/3eSOIM](http://goo.gl/3eSOIM). For an account of the event see Mohammad Labib, *The Seven Martyrs of Hurmuzak*, trans. and foreword, Moojan Momen (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981).

<sup>43</sup>See Labib, *The Seven Martyrs*, 4-5, 13-15, and passim.

From the beginning of the persecutions, in the same manner in which they responded to earlier episodes of abuse in the 1940s, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Iran lodged several appeals for protection and justice with the Iranian authorities. Shortly after the assaults began, on 9 May 1955, the National Spiritual Assembly addressed the Prime Minister of Iran, protesting the fact that government-sponsored radio stations such as Radio Tehran and the radio of the Air Force had vilified and misrepresented the Baha'is. In the same letter, the National Spiritual Assembly explained some of the Baha'i beliefs and principles, emphasizing that Baha'is were not "negligent of God," unconcerned about their country, and "bereft of a moral code and a standard of ethics," as the two speakers, Falsafi and Shikuhzadah, had claimed. The Assembly closed their letter by mentioning that the Baha'i international community had been recognized as a non-governmental organization at the UN. They, furthermore, drew attention to the basic human right to fundamental freedoms (which included freedom of religion) as defined in the Charter of the United Nations, to which Iran was a signatory, and demanded that the authorities intervene to prevent assaults against Baha'is.<sup>44</sup>

Baha'i institutions around the globe also sent telegrams and letters of appeal to Iran, addressing the Shah, the Prime Minister and, in some cases, the Senate. For example, on 24 May 1955, an initial set of cablegrams were sent, appealing the authorities to turn their attention to the plight of the Baha'is in Iran. The cablegrams were followed two days later by letters with further details. These cablegrams and letters clarified that the Baha'is were neither hostile to the government nor opposed to Islam, the two main charges leveled against them in the speeches broadcast on the radio and in other media outlets. They also emphasized that Baha'is of all lands regard Iran as a place of pilgrimage. Finally, they appealed the rights of Baha'is in Iran to be protected.<sup>45</sup> Aware of how sensitive the Iranian regime—and in particular the Shah—was about its public image, the authors of the cablegrams stressed their shock at reading about the persecution of the Baha'is of Iran in the press. The letters

<sup>44</sup>The author is grateful to the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice for sharing a copy of this letter and a number of other letters that will be discussed in this Section.

<sup>45</sup>Cablegram from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States to Mohammad Reza shah Pahlavi, dated 24 May 1955; Cablegram from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States

to the Prime minister of Iran, dated 24 May 1955; Cablegram from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States to the Senate of Iran, dated 24 May 1955; Cablegram from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Egypt and Sudan to Mohammad Reza shah Pahlavi, dated 24 May 1955; Cablegram from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Egypt and Sudan to the Prime Minister of Iran, dated 24 May 1955.

went on to provide further details. For example, in their letter to the Shah, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States emphasized that their "information concerning the actions taken by the Iranian Government against the Baha'is" had been "gathered from the public press," adding that this news had been published "in many American cities."<sup>46</sup> They also informed Prime Minister 'Ala that news about the suppression of Baha'is was "widely reported" in "the public press."<sup>47</sup> As the campaign of lies and misrepresentations in the media and the persecution of Baha'is in the country continued, and after previous communications were ignored, more letters were addressed to the Iranian government. This time, the missives reminded recipients of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, cognizant of the regime's concern about its public image among the nations of the world: "As signatory to the charter and Bill of Human Rights, Iran has assumed a responsibility in the eyes of the entire world," wrote the representatives of American Baha'is.<sup>48</sup> The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Egypt and Sudan wrote to Mohammad Reza Shah on 1 June 1955 that it had learned, "through the press," of the "shocking news" of attacks launched against Baha'is. Expounding on the Baha'i teachings in order to correct the distortions, inventions and lies levelled against the Baha'is, the letter lamented the fact that the "high reputation" Iran enjoys among Baha'is has been "injured" by the aggression committed against Baha'is, and added that the "persecutors disregarded the welfare of their country and rendered themselves violators of human rights and freedom." In their letter to the Prime Minister, also dated 1 June 1955, the representatives of the Baha'is of Egypt and Sudan called his attention to "[t]he Charter of Human Rights declared by the United Nations and unanimously approved by all the civilized countries including Iran."<sup>49</sup>

The numerous appeals, in particular those written outside Iran, at last bore fruit and the harshest attacks ceased for some time (albeit not completely as we will see). The government found that it could no longer comply with the wish of the ulama to effect or sanction extermination of the Iranian Baha'i community once and for

<sup>46</sup>Letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States to Mohammad Reza Shah, dated 26 May 1955.

<sup>47</sup>Letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States to the Prime Minister of Iran, dated 26 May 1955.

<sup>48</sup>Letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States to Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, dated 26 July 1955.

<sup>49</sup>In addition, Mildred Mottahedeh the repre-

sentative of the Baha'i International Community complained of the persecutions at the United Nations. Iran's representative, Rizazadah-shafaq, denied the allegations altogether, and claimed that very few Baha'is were living in Iran. Afnan, *Bigunahan*, 264 --a response that shows the regime's after the fact awareness of how the campaign could jeopardize the human rights records of the country.

all.<sup>50</sup> As Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi has demonstrated in his study of the episode, the 1955 anti-Baha'i campaign was both the apogee of the state-cleric collaboration and the point of their separation.<sup>51</sup>

The appeals, with their emphasis on the charter of human rights, would have far-reaching effects. It was perhaps, at least partly, as a face-saving, compensatory move triggered by the fear of becoming known internationally as a government that does not protect its own people that the Shah's regime grew particularly concerned with championing human rights. Princess Ashraf Pahlavi, the twin sister of the Shah, was even designated as the Chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1965. Three years later, the first UN International Conference on Human Rights was held in Tehran between 22 April and 12 May 1968 (2-22 Urdibihisht 1347).<sup>52</sup>

### Late 1950s to 1977-78: Relative Safety

In addition to the government, particularly the Shah himself, becoming concerned with the regime's reputation beyond Iran's frontiers, the gradual consolidation of the Shah's power, and the relative separation between the government and the clerics provided Baha'is with more safety. The incidents of plunder, looting, and murder dropped in number, though they never ceased.<sup>53</sup> The last sporadic murders (before 1977/1356) occurred in 1958/1337 when three Baha'is were killed: Nusrat Allah Mavaddati in Qurvah, Ardishir Rawhani in Khash, and Mirza 'Ali-Akbar Khan Safa'i in Khalajabad-i Arak.<sup>54</sup> One other wave of raiding and looting coincided with public demonstrations in support of Khomeini on 5 June 1963/15 Khurdad 1342. On that day, in the tradition of almost all socio-political upheavals in Iran, in a number of cities and localities, mobs attacked Baha'i properties. In Tehran, mobs raided the Baha'i cemetery, committed arson, and broke some of the grave stones.

<sup>50</sup>For details, see Tavakoli-Targhi, "Baha-isitizi," 107-110.

<sup>51</sup>Tavakoli-Targhi, "Bahaisitizi," 110.

<sup>52</sup>For an analysis of the socio-historical context of the convening of this conference in Tehran and its connection with the emergence of a coherent historical grand narrative of tolerance and inclusivity, see Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, "See 'Charkish-i tamadduni, tasamuh-i Kurushi va 'mutisavi al-huquqi' shahrivandi," *Iran Nameh*, 30:2 (Summer 2015), 52-119, specifically 105-113.

<sup>53</sup>For a list of persecutions in the year 1958/1337, see *Akhbar-i Amri*, no. 1-3 (Farvardin, Urdibihisht, Khurdad 1338), 63-71;

Turaj Amini, *Asnad-i Baha'iyān-i Iran, az sal-i 1332 ta inqilab-i Islami* (Sweden: Baran, 2014/1393), 863-69. For a similar list in the year 1959/1338, see *Akhbar-i Amri*, no. 1-4 (1339), 99-111; Amini, *snad az sal-i 1332ta inqilab*, 872-80. For a concise overview of the life of Baha'is in Iran under the Shah after the 1955 anti-Baha'i campaign, see Geoffrey Nash, *Iran's Secret Pogrom* (Sudbury, UK: Neville Spearman, 1982), 44-53.

<sup>54</sup>See *Akhbar-i Amri*, nos. 1-3 (Farvardin, Urdibihisht, Khurdad 1338), 63-71; on the murder of 'Ali Akbar Safa'i, also see *Akhbar-i Amri*, nos. 7 and 8 (Mihir, Aban 1338), 237-41; Amini, *Asnad az sal-i 1332ta inqilab*, 869-72.

In Kashan, they plundered the Baha'i center and the homes and shops of Baha'is. Eight families lost all their belongings. The culprits were arrested but were released in a few days with no trial or punishment.<sup>55</sup> In Aran va Bidgul in the province of Isfahan, demonstrators raided and plundered the homes of Baha'is.<sup>56</sup> In Isfahan, Shiraz, Saysan and elsewhere, however, the intervention of law enforcement forces prevented mobs from carrying out further attacks.<sup>57</sup> From around this time to the last two years of Mohammad Reza Shah's rule, for some thirteen years, Iranian Baha'is lived in a state of relative peace.

The absence of physical violence (murder, mass attacks, plunder, looting, arson, etc.) against Baha'is from the mid-1960s to 1977-78 can be traced to the dominance in Iran in this period of what Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi refers to as a "rights-based account of Iranian history," fundamentally different from the earlier accounts which emphasized ethnic and language purity. This "tolerance-based" civilizational account, Tavakoli-Targhi argues, "synthesized the pre-Islamic and the Islamic pasts into an organic and other-accommodating whole." It claimed that Iranian culture and Islam embodied the principles set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The coupling of the Cyrus Cylinder with the latter, Tavakoli-Targhi adds, "made possible the telling of a multi-confessional, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual civilizational narrative."<sup>58</sup>

Certainly, for the Shah, who considered himself the heir to Cyrus the Great, whom he told to "sleep in peace" because he was "awake" during the 2,500-year celebration of the Persian Empire,<sup>59</sup> it was only natural to see himself as the new monarchical

<sup>55</sup>*Akhbar-i Amri* no. 5, year 42 (Murdad 1342), 295.

<sup>56</sup>Electronic communication with the eye witness of the events, Mohammad Mahdavi far, 28 Tir, 1392 nurizad.info/?p=22128#comment-121926.

<sup>57</sup>*Akhbar-i Amri* no. 5, year 42 (Murdad 1342), 299.

<sup>58</sup>Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Archaeotopia: The Cyrus Cylinder and the De-confessionalization of Iranian Identity," paper presented at the symposium, "The Legacy of Cyrus the Great: Iran and Beyond," Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (Washington, 27 April 26 2013). An updated and extended version of the paper in Persian has been published in *Iran Nameh*: Tavakoli, "Charkish-i tamadduni." What Muhammad Reza Shah wrote in the last year of his life, supports Tavakoli-Targhi's analysis. Referring to "the sacred principles of Islam," he described

them as "the most progressive religious principles." He added, however, that his desire for the spirit of Islam to "penetrate ever more into the soul of our people was not accompanied by any animosity towards other religions." He then added, "history will one day show that one of the characteristics of my reign was tolerance. Iran since the time of Cyrus has always been a land of refuge..." Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Answer to History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), 61.

<sup>59</sup>For a discussion of Mohammad Reza Shah's proclamation of himself as a modern Cyrus, see Katouzian, *The Persians*, 263; Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran: The Pahlavis and After*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2007), 175. For a discussion of the 2,500-year celebration, the Shah's speech at the mausoleum of Cyrus the Great, and the international media's coverage of the event, see Ansari, *Modern Iran*, 218-222.

champion of human rights. As mentioned earlier, Baha'i institutions both inside, and more importantly, outside Iran, in all the letters of appeal they sent to the Iranian government and the Shah himself, reminded the recipients of Iran's official approval of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948.

### **No Right to Work According to the Law**

The absence of mob attacks and major physical assaults did not by any means guarantee full civil rights to Baha'is, even in this phase. For example, with regards to the right to work, the pattern for Baha'i (un)employment remained almost the same throughout Mohammad Reza Shah's reign: Baha'is were not eligible for employment in any government positions.<sup>60</sup> The implementation of this law, however, varied in different times and places, depending largely on the attitude of those tasked with implementing the law.

In some sectors, like the army or primary and secondary education, the employment of Baha'is was particularly restricted. Baha'is who were employed in the army usually had technical jobs, such as medical doctors, accountants or engineers. In addition to the limitations already present, Mohammad Reza Shah issued a special order on 1 December 1955/9 Azar 1334 barring new employment of Baha'is in the army, and forbidding those who were already in the army from publicly declaring [their faith] (*nabayad tazahur kunand*), at the risk of not being promoted.<sup>61</sup>

The Civil Employment Act (*Qanun-i istikhdam-i kishvari*), ratified on 22 May 1966/31 Khurdad 1345, explicitly mentioned that lack of prior "convictions for espousing corrupt beliefs" was a condition of application for employment in governmental jobs. The executive regulations appended to the law by different branches of the government invariably required applicants to clarify their religious affiliation. Ads for governmental jobs always included, as a basic eligibility

<sup>60</sup>For examples of how the implementation of the law could be influenced by the attitude of anti-Baha'i groups or individuals, see (1) the letter dated 8 Azar 1329/29 November 1950, written by Sirajansari, the head of the religious organization Ittihadiah Muslimin to Prime Minister Razmara, thanking him for dismissing some Baha'is from government positions and requesting that all remaining Baha'is be likewise expelled. Markaz-i Asnad-i Riyasat-i Jumhuri, Asnadi as Anjumanha va Majami',

36; and (2) the 15 Isfand 1328/ 6 March 1950 letter of a group of devoted Muslims in Khusasan to the Prime Minister, requesting that Baha'i employees be dismissed from educational institutes and fired from the hospital affiliated with the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, Ibid. 283-84.

<sup>61</sup>Haqiqatpajuh, *A'in-i Baha'i yik nihzat-i siyasi nist*, (Germany: Mahfil-i Ruhani-i Milli-i Baha'iyani-i Alman, 1982/1361), 86.

requirement, belief in one of the four “official religions of the country: Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism.” which basically meant that Baha’is were not allowed even to apply. However, the way such regulations were put into practice depended to a large degree on the attitude of the individuals directly in charge. Those who did not harbor anti-Baha’i sentiments accepted that Baha’is leave the religion column on forms blank. This seemed to have been the only way for a Baha’i to get a job in a government organization, and many did. Indicating one’s religion as Baha’i, however, would almost invariably lead to outright rejection of one’s application, unless the organization was semi-governmental (i.e., partly private). In the 1960s, when the internal security organization known as SAVAK<sup>62</sup> took control of all government positions and began to screen applicants for government jobs, stricter measures were enacted. These years coincided with the early years of the premiership of Amir Abbas Hoveyda who “appears to have felt impelled to be particularly severe in his treatment of Baha’is”<sup>63</sup> in face of accusations made by his political enemies that he himself was a Baha’i.<sup>64</sup> According to SAVAK documents, only two weeks after Hoveyda became prime minister, SAVAK officials conveyed to him a number of suggestions, based on advice received from pro-Shah clerics, as ways of debunking the rumor that he was a Baha’i. One of these suggestions called on the prime minister to refrain from employing Baha’is in government offices.<sup>65</sup>

Here, I would like to present three cases that shed light on the work conditions of Baha’is during Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign:

(1) On 27 February 1966, a year into Hoveyda’s premiership, the nursing school of the National Oil Company dismissed 19-year-old student Minu Yazdani for having indicated four months earlier in her employment forms that she was a Baha’i.<sup>66</sup> When she appealed the decision to expel her before the administrative officials of the Oil Company, they told her the decision had been made based on a circular from

<sup>62</sup>On SAVAK, see Gholam R. Afkhami, *The Life and Times of the Shah*, 381-403; Katouzian, *The Persians* 256.

<sup>63</sup>Borrowed from Martin, *The Persecution of the Baha’is of Iran*, 26-28.

<sup>64</sup>During his ministry, the Baha’i Center of Tehran which had been sealed off in 1955, remained closed; frequently, Baha’i gatherings in different parts of the country were cancelled, and Baha’i employment in government offices

were more strictly prohibited. See Haqiqatpajuh, *A’in-i Baha’i yik nihzat-i siyasi nist*, 79.

<sup>65</sup>See ‘Abd Allah Shahbazi, *Zuhur va suqut-i saltanat-i Pahlavi*, vol. 2, *Justarha’i az tarikh-i mu’asir-i Iran* (Tehran: Mu’assasah-’i Muta’li’at va Pazhuhishha-yi Siyasi, 1990), 388.

<sup>66</sup>Students of the nursing school of the Oil Company were employed from the beginning of their studies.



the prime minister's office that called for members of the "misled sect" (*firqah-yi zzalah*) employed after a certain date to be dismissed.<sup>67</sup>

(2) In 1969, Manuchihr Sharif al-Attiba, a young physician who applied for a psychiatry residency in a hospital affiliated with Tehran University, was denied admission for having identified himself as a Baha'i on the application form. Six years later, however, in July 1975, he was accepted for a psychiatry residency at Pahlavi (Shiraz) University, even though he again stated his religion on the application forms.<sup>68</sup> This example shows that the treatment Baha'is varied in different times and places.

(3) Colonel Husayn Vahdat-i Haqq entered the army high school during the reign of Reza Shah. Later, he enrolled in the military university, studied military engineering and in the process learned several foreign languages. A high score on an exam administered in 1971 led to his being chosen to be sent to foreign countries as the military attaché of the embassy of Iran. The General in charge of the matter summoned Vahdat-i Haqq and told him that despite his high score on the exam, he could not be sent on the mission because of his religion. The only solution would be to change his religion in his file because, "this file must be signed by His Imperial Majesty, and he will not do so [if he sees you that have said that you are a Baha'i]."<sup>69</sup> Vahdat-i Haqq responded that if he accepted to lie about his religion, how could he then be trusted to not betray the Shah and his country by selling military secrets? Later, the General informed Vahdat-i Haqq that when reporting the case to the Shah, he conveyed Vahdat-i Haqq's remarks to the monarch who in turn said, "He is right, he is right." The Shah then approved Vahdat-i Haqq's appointment as the military attaché of the embassy of Iran in Germany. Under the Islamic Republic, Vahdat-i Haqq was arrested and executed in 1982. This third example shows that the authorities did close their eyes when there was a need for the expertise of a Baha'i.

### **Baha'is and Positions of Power**

On the positive side, during the reign of the second Pahlavi monarch, Baha'is for the most part (apart from a number of sporadic cases) were not denied the right

<sup>67</sup>Hoveyda became the prime minister on 26 January 1965 (6 Bahman 1343), and Minu Yazdani was dismissed from her nursing school on 27 February 1966 (8 Esfand 1344). This author's personal interview with Minu Yazdani. The official letter of dismissal from her nursing

school is in the author's possession.

<sup>68</sup>This author's personal interview with Dr. Manuchihr Sharif al-Attiba (Manshadi), 1 October 2014.

<sup>69</sup>Mihri Vahdat-i Haqq (Haqiqatju), "'Ishq-i bi-zaval,'" Manuscript in private hands, 53-54.

to higher education. This fact, combined with the emphasis placed in the Baha'i religion on education led to a large number of Baha'is receiving advanced degrees. As we saw above, their expertise, if seriously needed, led in some cases to officials looking the other way on the question of religious identity, allowing some Baha'is to secure high-level positions (again, provided that they left the religion column on official forms blank).<sup>70</sup> They were also permitted to be active in the private sector. As a result, a number of individual Baha'is became successful entrepreneurs and industrialists.

In fact, among the factors that made the life of the Baha'is in Iran under Mohammad Reza Shah's rule complex and uneven is that in the midst of the official discrimination in employment laws, there were a number of individual Baha'is who held prominent positions.<sup>71</sup> In fact, when it came to public posts, Baha'is, as a matter of principle, could not accept any position that was political in nature or required membership in a political party.<sup>72</sup> As we will see below, the only Baha'i who held a political position, General Sani'i, ultimately had to choose between keeping his political position and being a member of the Baha'i community.

Much has been written of the Shah's personal physician, General Dr. 'Abd al-Karim Ayadi (d. 1980), being a Baha'i—a fact usually cited in anti-Baha'i polemics widely disseminated in Iran under the Islamic Republic to try and establish ties between the former regime, and particularly the monarch himself, and the Baha'is of Iran.<sup>73</sup> Ayadi was a well-known Baha'i.<sup>74</sup> More than merely a physician, he functioned as the Shah's

<sup>70</sup>For a good discussion of this topic, see H.E. Chehabi, "Anatomy of Prejudice: Reflections on Secular anti-Baha'ism in Iran," in *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-Historical Studies* (London: Routledge, 2008): 184- 197. See pages 190-91, in particular.

<sup>71</sup>The exaggeration of this fact has been used in the Islamic Republic to justify the persecution of Baha'is. A revealing example is the letter dated 26 Shahrivar 1360/17 September 1981, written on behalf of the Minister of Agriculture to a Baha'i employee declaring that his employment had been illegal to begin with, listing five prominent Baha'is of the time of the Shah as "traitors" to the country (suggesting that the addressee was to blame for believing in the same "fake cult" as them), and ordering the employee to return all compensation he had received to the state. See the document in Fereyduh Vah-

man, *Yik-sad va shast sal mubarizah ba diyarat-i Baha'i: gushah'i az tarikh-i ijtimai'-dini-i Iran dar dawran-i mu'asir* (Darmstadt, Germany: 'Asr-i Jadid Publisher, 2009), 712.

<sup>72</sup>For more on this topic, see Moojan Momen, "The Baha'i Faith and Politics," paper presented at the conference "Intellectual Othering and the Baha'i Question in Iran," Toronto, 3 July 2011, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtVY1B-W9s0A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtVY1B-W9s0A) (accessed 11 April 2015).

<sup>73</sup>See for example, Shahsavari, *Asnad-i fa'aliyyat-i Baha'iyān*, 135-36.

<sup>74</sup>While Dr. Ayadi definitely believed in the Baha'i religion, he was never a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Iran, the elected body leading the affairs of the Baha'i community, or even the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Tehran.

“chief of staff, private secretary,” and “trusted emissary.”<sup>75</sup> Officially, he was the Shah’s physician, a post that was not political in nature. Highly trusted by the Shah, he was the head of the Health Office of the army, a position that made him responsible for all medicinal purchases for both the army and the Organization of Social Insurance. The memoirs of an Iranian who, for a long time, directly observed the way Ayadi managed this task depicts him as highly diligent and responsible.<sup>76</sup> While much has been written about Ayadi’s power and influence because of his proximity to the Shah, the fact is that during the anti-Baha’i campaign of 1955, when Baha’is needed protection most, he was sent to Italy for nine months, apparently to avoid instigating the clerics by the presence of a Baha’i in the Shah’s Court. Ironically, despite his position, he was subject to SAVAK surveillance—an indication of the strength of the “animus against Baha’is.”<sup>77</sup> As the political unrest grew in the country in the last year of his reign, the Shah removed Ayadi from his position as his personal physician. Ayadi left Iran before the victory of the Islamic Revolution.<sup>78</sup>

Next in line of people who were actually Baha’is and were given a prominent role under Mohammad Reza Shah’s rule was General Asad Allah Sani’i (d.1998).<sup>79</sup> During the time when Muhammad Reza was the Crown Prince, Sani’i was appointed

<sup>75</sup>Abbas Milani, *Eminent Persians: Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 2008), 2: 1058-61. Most of what has become public knowledge about Ayadi is based on the controversial memoirs of the Shah’s long-time friend, General Husayn Fardust (d. 1987) written while in captivity under the Islamic Republic, edited and published posthumously: ‘Abdollah Shahbazi, ed., *Zuhur va suqut-i saltanat-i Pahlavi, vol. 1, Khatirat-i artishbud-i sabiq Husayn Fardust* (Tehran: Mu’assasah-i Mutali‘at va pazhuhishha-yi siyasi, 1990). Milani convincingly refers to this work as “alleged memoirs,” and describes it rightly as “vituperative.” Milani, *Eminent Persians*, 548, 285.

<sup>76</sup>See Goel Cohen, ed., *Az kargari ta karafarini: zindigamamah va khatirat-i Jack Mahfar, az Jubarah in Isfahan to Tehran and Geneva in Swiss*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Geneva, Switzerland: The Mahfar Cultural Foundation, 2011), 121-27, 173-182. Also available at [jmahfar.com/index.html](http://jmahfar.com/index.html) (accessed 12 June 2015). The book has also been translated into English by Abbas Nayeri and Nazanine Nayeri, as *From Labor-*

*er to Entrepreneur: Memoirs of Jack Maher, from Joubareh in Esfahan to Tehran and Geneva* (Geneva, Switzerland: The Mahfar Cultural Foundation, 2013), available at [jmahfar.com/books/english/](http://jmahfar.com/books/english/) (accessed 12 June 2015). Mahfar depicts a picture of Ayadi much different than the one presented by Fardust (see the previous note). While quite influential because of his access to the Shah, Mahfar’s Ayadi is quite wary not to abuse that power (*Az kargari* 175). He only owns two villages in which he promotes agriculture while taking care of the medical needs of the villagers who are satisfied and happy with him (*Az kargari* 117), and in the process of the purchase of medicine, always makes the best deals for the Iranian government (*Az kargari* 122).

<sup>77</sup>Milani, *Eminent Persians*, 2:1061.

<sup>78</sup>Milani, *Eminent Persians*, 2:1061.

<sup>79</sup>On General Sani’i, see his autobiography, Asad Allah Sani’i, *Yadha va yaddashtha* (Montreal: Farhang, 2009); Murtaza Mushir, *Khatirat-i Sipahbud Asad Allah Sani’i* (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp, 2002).

the Head of his Office. Later, he became the Minister of War. Since this was a political position and Baha'is are not to accept such positions, he was advised by the Baha'i administration to resign. The Shah, however, refused to accept his letter of resignation. When he chose not to relinquish his position, he lost his Baha'i administrative rights.<sup>80</sup>

The majority of prominent people in political positions, usually mentioned as Baha'is in the narrative of the Islamic Republic, were not Baha'is.<sup>81</sup> Some came from Baha'i families or had Baha'i ancestors, but never identified themselves with the religion, and even openly expressed their allegiance to Islam.<sup>82</sup> Such was the case with Amir 'Abbas Hoveyda (d. 1979) whose grandfather was a Baha'i, but whose father had distanced himself from the religion, accepted a political position, and married a Muslim.<sup>83</sup> Hoveyda was raised a Muslim, but that did not prevent the ulama from voicing dissatisfaction with his premiership. The Shah himself knew Hoveyda was not a Baha'i and is said to have been angered by rumors to the contrary.<sup>84</sup> As mentioned earlier, in order to prove that he was not a Baha'i, Hoveyda took measures such as more strictly enforcing the law of government employment being restricted to Muslims and recognized religious minorities—hence barring Baha'is. Ironically, however, he is also reported to have offered a well-known Baha'i, General 'Ali Muhammad Khadimi (d.1978), who was the head

<sup>80</sup>See the 27 August 1965 letter of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Iran to the Universal House of Justice on this matter, cited in Turaj Amini, *Asnad-i Baha'iyān-i Iran, as Sal-i 1332 ta Inqilab-i Islami* (Sweden: Baran, 2014), 1051. On the General losing his administrative rights, see *Akhbar-i Amri* 10 (1358), 156.

<sup>81</sup>Among those usually referred to as Baha'is on totally baseless grounds are: Farrukhru Parsa (d. 1979), the Minister of Education; and General Ni'mat Allah Nasiri (d. 1979), the head of the notorious SAVAK for thirteen years. The list varies depending on the source.

<sup>82</sup>Examples of ministers who had Baha'i parents without ever identifying themselves as Baha'is include Mansur Ruhani (d. 1979), the Minister of Agriculture and Utilities (who was born to a Muslim mother and Baha'i father), and Mahnaz Afkhami (b. 1940), the Minister of Women's Affairs (who had a Baha'i mother and a Muslim father). It is important to note that unlike other religions, being born into a Baha'i family does not automatically make one a Ba-

ha'i. One needs to declare his or her allegiance to Baha'i beliefs and principles in order to be identified as a Baha'i.

<sup>83</sup>On Hoveyda, see 'Abbas Milani, *The Persian Sphinx: Amir Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Iranian Revolution*, (London, UK: IB Tauris, 2000). See also, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. "Hoveyda, Amir Abbas."

<sup>84</sup>Mahmud Turbati Sanjabi, *Nukhustvazir sih daqiqah-'i pish darguzasht* (Tehran: 'Ata'i, 1383/2004), 91. When Ehsan Naraghi mentioned the rumor to the Shah, he responded, "No. That is pure calumny. Hoveida [sic] is not a Baha'i. The people are talking nonsense." Ehsan Naraghi, *From Palace to Prison: Inside the Iranian Revolution*, trans. (from French) Nilou Mobasser (Chicago: Ivon R. Dee, 2007), 43. The fact that the Shah knew Hoveyda was not a Baha'i, however, did not prevent him from scapegoating the latter and imprisoning him in the turbulent last months of his rule, in the words of Naraqī, "to appease the masses." *Ibid.*, 42.

of Iran's national airlines (HOMA), the new post of Minister of Transportation, an offer which General Khadimi declined, clearly stating that his religious beliefs did not allow him to hold a political position.<sup>85</sup>

Another person who held political office and was not a Baha'i but is nonetheless introduced as one in historical narratives sanctioned by the Islamic Republic is Parviz Sabiti (b. 1936), the second in command of SAVAK. Sabiti was born into a Baha'i family, but his father had lost his rights to participate in Baha'i community affairs, and Sabiti himself never became a Baha'i. This fact was announced by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Iran on 15 Farvardin 1358/4 April 1979.<sup>86</sup> In a short autobiography apparently written when he sought to join SAVAK, Sabiti asserted that while his parents were Baha'is, he considered himself a Muslim from the start of high school.<sup>87</sup> In an interview in recent years, however, he clarified that he did not believe in any religion and did not hesitate to make disparaging remarks about the Baha'i faith.<sup>88</sup>

Among the most successful Iranian Baha'is of this era was Habib Allah Sabit (d. 1990), an entrepreneur and industrialist whose companies employed more than ten thousand people.<sup>89</sup> He displayed keen business acumen from a young age and gradually amassed a fortune through innovative and productive ways. He brought television to Iran, only to see it taken over by the government. His wealth brought him into contact with influential people. In 1953, when he was in New York, Mohammad Reza Shah's mother traveled there. Given the political situation in Iran at the time, the members of the Iranian Embassy were reluctant to receive her. Upon disembarking the ship, the Queen Mother broke her leg, and Sabit and his wife took her to the hospital and cared for her. This event marked the start of an amicable relationship between the couple and the Queen Mother that lasted many years.<sup>90</sup> During the 1955 anti-Baha'i campaign, he tried to use his connections to mitigate the dangers that Baha'is faced.<sup>91</sup>

There were a number of other wealthy Baha'is living in Iran during this period. The discussion of their social and financial activities is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>85</sup>Personal e-mail communication with Mona Khadimi, 'Ali Muhammad Khadimi's daughter, 11 Apr. 2015.

<sup>86</sup>See Haqiqatpajuh, *A'in-i Baha'i yik nihzat-i siyasi nist*, 79-81.

<sup>87</sup>See Shahbazi, *Zuhur va suqut-i saltanat-i Pahlavi*, 2: 450-51; Milani, *Eminent Persians*, 1:287.

<sup>88</sup>See Irfan Qani'ifard, *Dar damgah-i hadisah*

(Los Angeles: Ketab, 2012), 2: 678-85.

<sup>89</sup>See Habib Sabit, *Sarguzasht-i Habib Sabit* (Los Angeles, 1993); Milani, *Eminent Persians*, 2: 678-85. An English translation of this book is available at <https://archive.org/details/HabibSabetMem>; See also, *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. "Sabet, Habib."

<sup>90</sup>See Habib Sabit, *Sarguzasht*, 239-47.

<sup>91</sup>See *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. "Sabet, Habib."

The acknowledgement of their existence, and the fact that they had the opportunity to prosper, however, is necessary for a realistic appraisal of the Baha'i community during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah.<sup>92</sup>

### Anti-Baha'i Societies

Baha'is were also unofficially permitted to hold their own gatherings, provided they were low-key and did not draw public attention. At the same time, anti-Baha'i societies were supported by SAVAK to harass Baha'is and interrupt their meetings. The Anjuman-i Khayriyyah-'i Hujjatiyyah-'i Mahdaviyyat, or Anjuman-i Zidd-i Baha'iiyyat<sup>93</sup> was founded by Shaykh Mahmoud Halabi with the permission of the Grand Ayatollah Burujirdi, apparently right after the 1953 coup that reinstated Mohammad Reza Shah in power. The Anjuman, which listed non-involvement in politics as one of its principles, was supported by SAVAK—a well-documented fact.<sup>94</sup> The regime and SAVAK likely used the Anjuman as a conduit to channel the religious sentiments of the youth and distract them from dissident religio-political groups. Some sympathetic scholars and former members have tried to depict the Anjuman as a largely progressive and non-violent association.<sup>95</sup> A more accurate depiction of its activities and their at times violent nature has been recorded by others among its members<sup>96</sup> as well as by Baha'is who been physically attacked by the group. Baha'is, moreover, have noted that law enforcement officials have been unwilling to prosecute members of the Anjuman when the victims of their attacks were revealed to be Baha'is.<sup>97</sup> The statement made by the reformist Muslim 'Abd al-Karim Soroush as to why he left the Anjuman as a young man testifies to the fact that its activities included some physical violence which led the young Soroush to dissociate himself from it.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>92</sup>One individual frequently mentioned in anti-Baha'i polemics is Huzhabr Yazdani (d.1389/2010). See Milani, *Eminent Persians*, 2: 799-807.

<sup>93</sup>In fact, the name usually used by this society's members before the Islamic Revolution was *Anjuman-i Zidd-i Baha'iiyyat*. See Michael M.J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison, WC.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 48. On the Pahlavi regime allowing this society to function, see also Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 19.

<sup>94</sup>For the relationship between SAVAK and Hujjatiyyah see Ziya' al-Din 'Uliya-nasab and Salman 'Alavi-nik, *Jariyan-shinasi-i anjuman-i Hujjatiyyah* (Qum, Zulal-Kawsar,

2006/1385), 115-140; for more documents on SAVAK supporting Hujjatiyyah, see Amini, *Asnad-i Baha'iiyan-i Iran, as sal-i 1332 ta inqilab-i Islami*, 1048-1050.

<sup>95</sup>See *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. "Hojjatiya."

<sup>96</sup>See Mehdi Abedi's description in "Shi'ite Socialization in Pahlavi Iran: Autobiographical Sondages in a Postmodern World," in Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*, 48-54.

<sup>97</sup>See Nader Saiedi, "Asibshinasi-i rawshanfikri-i Iran" *Iran-i Emruz* (23 March 2009), [www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php/politic/more/17686/](http://www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php/politic/more/17686/) (accessed 11 Apr. 2015).

<sup>98</sup>Quoted in 'Uliya-nasab and 'Alavi-nik, *Jariyan-shinasi-i anjuman-i Hujjatiyyah*, 104. Originally, published in the newspaper *Jami'ah*, no. 100, 8 Tir 1377/29 June 1998.

The Hujjatiyyah members were given free rein by SAVAK to disrupt Baha'i gatherings, although their main organizational duty was to find non-Baha'is who seemed to have been attracted to Baha'i ideas and try to convince them not to join the Baha'i community. Neither the collaboration of SAVAK nor the freedom to harass Baha'is was exclusive to Hujjatiyyah as an anti-Baha'i organization. The older organization, Anjuman-i Tablighat-i Islami, established in 1941 by 'Ata Allah Shihabpur,<sup>99</sup> is reported to have sought and obtained the support of SAVAK in 1972 in its activities against the Baha'i community.<sup>100</sup>

Many members of these anti-Baha'i organizations were schoolteachers. The childhood and early youth memories of this author in Shiraz is filled with memories from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s of teachers from both elementary and secondary schools who attacked everything that Baha'is considered holy with no opportunity on the part of Baha'i students or their parents to defend their beliefs or protest the verbal abuse.

### Officially Non-Existent

Throughout the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, Baha'is as *Baha'is* did not have a social existence.<sup>101</sup> With the exception of anti-Baha'i polemical works, the name "Baha'i" almost never appeared on TV or the radio or in newspapers, books, and magazines. In the extremely rare cases when Baha'is were alluded to in mass media, they were called "*firqah-i zallah*" (the misguided sect). Even the most successful Baha'i entrepreneur, artist, or physician could not be publically identified as such. Baha'is were legally "non-persons" in Iranian public life.<sup>102</sup> At one point, the representative of the Iranian delegation told the United Nations that there were no Baha'is in Iran.<sup>103</sup> This fiction was maintained throughout the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah.<sup>104</sup>

### 1977-1978, Unsafe Again

The socio-political turmoil of the last two years of the reign of the Shah rekindled the pattern of Baha'i persecution during times of crisis. In May 1977, Ruh Allah

<sup>99</sup>See Tavakoli-Targhi, "Baha'isiti," 91-92; *Encyclopedia Iranica*, s.v. "Anjoman-e Tabligat-e Islami."

<sup>100</sup>The original document is dated 27 Aban 1351/18 November 1972. It has been published in *Mojahid* 1, 84 (19 Khرداد 1359/9 June 1980); See also *Encyclopedia Iranica* s.v. "Anjoman-e Tabligat-e Islami."

<sup>101</sup>This has been interpreted by some as a situation in which the Baha'i community had a *de facto* presence while *de jure*, this presence was denied. See Cyrus 'Ala'i, "Tarikhchah-i maliyat bar irs.

<sup>102</sup>Borrowed from Martin, *persecution* 14.

<sup>103</sup>As mentioned in footnote 48, following the 1953 anti-Baha'i campaign, the Iranian delegate at the United Nations, Rizasadah-shafaq, claimed there were very few Baha'is in Iran. Fischer, however, records that the delegate, Mrs. Teimurtash, "told the United Nations of behalf of the Iranian delegation that there were no Baha'is in Iran." Fischer, *Iran, from Religious Dispute to Revolution*, 187.

<sup>104</sup>Fischer, *Iran, from Religious Dispute to Revolution*, 187.

Taymuri was killed in the village of Fazil Abad near Gorgan.<sup>105</sup> The murderers were arrested, but the actual trial was postponed numerous times. Finally, they were released upon getting a letter from the family of the deceased exempting the killers from any possible penalties or liabilities. Worried of the possibility that this indicated a new wave of persecutions, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Iran advised the Baha'is to pursue a legal course and appeal to the local or national government should they face persecution.<sup>106</sup> On 7 November 1978/16 Aban 1357, General 'Ali Muhammad Khadimi was assassinated in front of his wife at their home. The assassins were most likely SAVAK agents.<sup>107</sup> Less than two weeks later, the Islamist newspaper *Sitarah-i Islam* [The Star of Islam] reported on 20 November 1978/29 Aban 1357: "Baha'is are the cause of problems in our country and must be punished." The heightened religious fervor of the Islamists was accompanied by sporadic attacks on Baha'is, in different parts of Iran. In December 1978, mob violence unleashed against Baha'is in the village of Sa'diyyah near Shiraz extended to inside the city. From early December, with the beginning of the holy month of Muharram—when Shi'i religious sentiments are usually at their most fervent—rumors began to spread in the suburbs of Shiraz about setting the city's Baha'i Center and the homes of Baha'is on fire. The village of Sa'diyyah was where these threats materialized. Sa'diyyah was home to a mixed Baha'i and Muslim community with familial ties among families from the two religions. A cleric spoke from the pulpit on three successive nights against the Baha'is, declaring that they must convert to Islam or suffer the burning of their homes.<sup>108</sup> On the 13<sup>th</sup> of December, a mob gathered at the door of a Baha'i named Sifat Allah Fahandizh (d. 1978) who was a low ranking officer in the army. They were intent on dragging Fahandizh and his family to the mosque to force them to recant their faith. According to some accounts, they also threatened to take away his daughter (in effect, a threat of rape, a highly feared taboo in Iranian culture). Fahandizh appealed to law enforcement officers for help, but they never arrived. He then went to the rooftop

<sup>105</sup>See *Akhbar-i Amri*, 5 (Khurdad-Tir 1356), 202-209. For a detailed and heart-wrenching account of the murder, see Amini, *Asnad-i Baha'iyān-i Iran, as Sal-i 1332 ta Inqilab-i Islami*, 438-40.

<sup>106</sup>See *Akhbar-i Amri*, 11 (1356), 431.

<sup>107</sup>For more on the life and death of General Khadimi see Cyrus 'Alai, "Chigunigi-i darguzasht-i sipahbud 'Ali Muhammad Khadimi," *Iran Nameh*, 30:1 (Spring 2015), 246-262.

<sup>108</sup>Habib Allah Hakimi's notes. At the time,

Hakimi was serving as a member of the Local Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Shiraz—a position that naturally caused him to pay close attention to the events that were unfolding. Referring to the Sa'diyyah incident, Fischer writes that "accounts of the attack on Baha'is are confused." The various accounts cited in his book reflect this confusion. Fischer, *Iran, from Religious Dispute to Revolution*, 206. Hakimi's notes are a valuable first-hand and accurate record of that tragic incident.



of his house. When some among the mob attempted to force down the door to his home, he did what the original assailants had wished him to do all along: he shot at those attacking him with his gun. In return, both he and his wife were gunned down. That a Baha'i had killed Muslims gave the instigators the excuse they had sought. Mobs attacked the homes of Baha'is in Sa'diyyah and set them on fire. News of the attacks spread quickly. Mobs of two hundred men or more, all wearing black as part of the 'Ashura mourning ritual, began attacking the homes of Baha'is in Shiraz, one street at a time.<sup>109</sup> During the next two to three days, around two hundred Baha'i homes were raided, plundered and set on fire, as were a significant number of shops and factories.<sup>110</sup> For the most part, the military forces and police did not interfere or actively restrain or oppose the assaulting mobs. In fact, in some cases, the gas required to fuel the fire was obtained from military vehicles with the permission of military personnel. Fearing that the escalation in violence might get completely out of hand, Ayatollah Shaykh Baha' al-Din Mahallati (d. 1981) at last announced that "the habitat, houses, and shops of others must be protected even if they are not Muslims, and that religious conflicts must stop."<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, Ayatollah Ruh Allah Khomeini in France<sup>112</sup> and Ayatollah Hajj 'Abd al-Husayn Dastghayb (d.1981) in Shiraz<sup>113</sup> both accused the Pahlavi regime and its secret police, SAVAK, of orchestrating the incident.<sup>114</sup> Shortly thereafter, in other parts of Iran, Baha'is

<sup>109</sup>Personal recollections of the author.

<sup>110</sup>A Baha'i living in Shiraz at the time recorded that "some 200" Baha'i homes were subjected to arson. See Abu al-Qasim Afnian's letter to Muhammad 'Ali Jamalzadah in Muhammad Ali Homayoun Katouzian, "Du Namah az Jamalzadah," *Mihrgan*, vol.2, no. 4 (Winter 1372/1994), 53. A recent study indicates 170 houses and shops in Shiraz were burned, and in total 295 were attacked. It also asserts that the extent of the arsons, and the accuracy with which the houses of Baha'is were spotted both indicate a collaboration between SAVAK and Hujjatiyyah, the two organizations well informed of the locations of the houses of Baha'is. See Amini, *Asnad-i Baha'iyān-i Iran, as Sal-i 1332 ta Inqilab-i Islami*, 455,458. A western scholar has suggested 400 houses and shops were looted. See Karen L. Pliskin, "Camouflage, Conspiracy, and Collaborators: Rumors of the Revolution," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. XIII, Nos. 1-4 (1980): 55-81.

<sup>111</sup>See the newspaper *Pars*, no. 4233 (27 Azar 1357/17 Muharram 1399/18 Dec. 1979). The same column titled "The News of Shiraz," pro-

vides an obliterated and distorted account of the events in Sa'diyyah and Shiraz. For similar announcements from Ayatollah Mahallati, see Vahman, *Yik-sad va shast sal*, 444-45.

<sup>112</sup>See Khomeini, *Sahifah-i Nur* (Tehran: Saziman-i Madarik-i Farhangi-i Inqilab-i Islami, 1361), 4:79.

<sup>113</sup>For Ayatollah Dastghayb's statement, see *Pars*, no. 4242 (2 Bahman 1357/ 22 Jan. 1979), 4. Writing days after the attacks, Dastghayb clarified in this statement that according to Islamic laws, whenever an infidel (*kafir*) lives in the lands of Islam, their lives and properties must be protected by the Muslim ruler, a principle he applied to "unrecognized sects" as well.

<sup>114</sup>The published SAVAK documents pertaining to the events contain some inaccuracies. The editorial notes added to those documents distort the truth, depicting Baha'is as the assailants and the murderers. See *Inqilab-i Islami bih ravayat-i asnad-i SAVAK*, vol. 20, 21 Azar to 25 Azar [12 to 16 Dec.1978] (Tehran: Markaz-i Barrasi-i Asnad-i Tarikhi-i Vizarat-i Ittila'at, 1385/2006), 146-48, 258-59, 261, 405, 407.

were also persecuted. A particularly severe case was in Buyr-Ahmad where a series of mob attacks began on the night of 12 January 1979/22 Day 1357.<sup>115</sup> A number of Baha'is were killed in the process, and elsewhere in Iran in the last months of the reign of the Pahlavi regime.<sup>116</sup> While there is evidence to suggest that the November 1978 attacks in Sa'diyyah and Shiraz may have been instigated by SAVAK, with regards to these other incidents, in retrospect, it is difficult to know whether it was SAVAK instigating the attacks, or whether the clerics and people involved acted on their own when they felt there would be no governmental intervention given the unrest in the country.

## Conclusion

As far as the treatment by the government, clerics and other citizens was concerned, throughout the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, the Baha'i community of Iran passed through distinct phases: the first characterized by a lack of physical safety as a result of the collaborations between the government and the clerics, culminating in the 1955 anti-Baha'i campaign. At the height of the 1955 mass persecution of Baha'is, the Shah, concerned about his image abroad and caught between the demands of the clerics to escalate the repression of the Baha'i community on the one hand, and the need to construct the image of a champion of human rights on the other, chose the latter. Indeed, the lessons learned from the international repercussions of the 1955 anti-Baha'i campaign seem to have been one of the main reasons for the Shah to begin emphasizing human rights as a fundamental thread of the Iranian fabric.<sup>117</sup> The fact that the international press had accused the Iranian government of being partly responsible for some of the attacks and turning a blind eye to others made it all the more necessary for the Shah and his government to articulate and reiterate their respect for fundamental human rights. In his analysis of the repercussions of the 1955 anti-Baha'i campaign, Tavakoli-Targhi discusses how a tolerance-based civilizational narrative originally created, decades earlier, by the Bar Association of Iran, gradually developed into a more solid grand narrative of tolerance and inclusivity in the 1960s.<sup>118</sup> Analyzing the history of Iran in the

<sup>115</sup>For details, see Geoffrey Nash, "The Persecution of the Baha'i Community of Iran, Ridvan 1979-Ridvan 1983," *The Baha'i World 1979-1983* (Haifa, Israel: The Baha'i World Center, 1986), 271-74.

<sup>116</sup>See Nikusifât, *Sarkub va kushtar*, 2: 35-36 for details about three of the Baha'is killed between 22 Murdad 1357/13 Aug. 1978 to 19

Dey 1357/9 Jan. 1979, in Jahrum, Mianduab, and Hisar Khurasan.

<sup>117</sup>This was in line with the Shah's self-image as a "progressive," even "revolutionary" monarch. See Ansari, *Modern Iran*, 160, 163-4, and passim.

<sup>118</sup>Tavakoli-Targhi, "Charkhish-i Tamadduni," 53-57, 85-93.

decades prior to the Islamic Revolution, Tavakoli-Targhi refers to the continuous conflict and confrontation of two governmentalities: a jurisprudential (*fiqhi*), mono-confessional, and intolerant governmentality vs. a legal (civil law-based, *qanuni*), multi-confessional, and tolerant governmentality based on the value of “equal rights.”<sup>119</sup> Using this analytical lens, it can be said that the bloody history of the Baha’i community in the 1940s and the early to mid-1950s was the result of the jurisprudential governmentality, and the relative safety of the 1960s and early to mid-1970s the result of the legal, multi-confessional governmentality. In the turbulent last two years of Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign, then, the aggression against the Baha’i community was again the manifestation of jurisprudential governmentality.

Using the right to be employed in government positions as a point of departure, it can be said that, even during the period of the dominance of a tolerance-based, multi-confessional civilizational grand narrative, the Baha’i community was officially deprived of some of its basic civil rights. However, considering the varying ways in which regulations governing employment were implemented, the fact that Baha’is were free to work in the private sector, that they were, unofficially, allowed to perform their religious functions, and that the SAVAK-supported-Hujjatiyyah Society was allowed to harass them, we can conclude that life for the Baha’is of Iran during this period was far from stable or homogenous. Consequently, the history of the Baha’i community of Iran at this time was far from being a linear or monolithic narrative. As far as the monarch himself was concerned, despite his strong identification with Shi’ism,<sup>120</sup> he did not particularly harbor anti-Baha’i prejudice, given his implicit trust in at least two Baha’is, Dr. ‘Abd al-Karim Ayadi, his personal physician, and General Asad Allah Sani’i, the head of his office as Crown Prince and his Minister of War as Shah. However, whenever he felt that his power and interests would be in danger, he was ready to scapegoat Baha’is, as demonstrated by his sanctioning the clerics to start their attacks against Baha’is in 1955 and the events of the turbulent closing years of his reign.

In his interpretation of the situation of the Baha’is in the interplay between the clerics and the state in modern Iranian history, Roy Mottahedeh suggests that in Iran,

the Baha’is throughout most of their history were a pawn that...governments played in their complex game with the mullahs...[N]one of the governments

<sup>119</sup>For a definition of Foucauldian notion of “governmentality,” see Tavakoli-Targhi, “Charkhish-i Tamadduni,” 55-56; for the dis-

cussion of the historical conflict between these two governmentalities, see *idem*, 55-93.

<sup>120</sup>See Pahlavi, *Answer to History*, 57-61.

was willing to surrender this pawn in a single move ... Tolerating Baha'is was a way of showing mullas who was boss. Correspondingly, allowing active persecution of the Baha'is was the low-cost pawn that could be sacrificed to the mullas when the government was in trouble or in special need of mulla support.<sup>121</sup>

Mottahedeh's suggestion explains the interaction between the Shah and the clerics in relation to the Baha'i community. However, there was also a third element which played a crucial role in the social life of Baha'is: everyday Iranian citizens who chose to act either as employers who ignored the religion column on official forms or as, for example, a chief of police to three different cities where Baha'is were murdered with impunity. Today, when the first two elements, the government and the clerics have merged into one, some among the third element have begun to act in promising ways by not only accepting Baha'is as Iranians rather than Iran's "internal other" but by joining the cohort of those who express their objection to the injustices that continue to be perpetrated against the Baha'i community. The rise in consciousness by this third element merits further study.

<sup>121</sup>Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 238-239.