

**The Bahá'í International Community's  
United Nations Office**

# UPDATE

## *Situation of the Bahá'ís in the Islamic Republic of Iran*

**February 2009**

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This document presents only the latest developments in the ongoing oppression that targets Bahá'í citizens of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It covers the months from October 2008 to the end of January 2009, as well as detailing some previously unreported incidents that occurred earlier last year.

To complement the most recent news given here, we provide more information on our website (see <http://bic.org/areas-of-work/defense>). Moreover, the 2008 edition of *The Bahá'í Question – Cultural Cleansing in Iran* reviews the historical and legal background, and also documents the past five years of greatly increased persecution. It can be downloaded at: <http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/TheBahaiQuestion.pdf> or obtained in a bound edition from Bahá'í International Community representatives.

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## **1. Arbitrary arrests and detention**

The Bahá'í International Community is seriously concerned about a sudden upsurge in the number of arbitrary arrests and imprisonments targeting members of the Bahá'í religious minority in Iran.

There were five Bahá'ís in Iranian prisons in 2001. The total went down to four in 2002-2003, and only two members of the community were arrested in 2004. Then the persecution began to intensify again. Since 2005, there have been over 200 arrests, including 51 during the past year. But it should be noted that the sharpest increase of all occurred most recently: in less than two months, **from 6 December 2008 to 1 February 2009, 30 Bahá'ís were arrested and detained**. Far more women than men were taken into custody during this latest series of imprisonments.

The officials who conducted the raids were from the Ministry of Information (i.e. Iran's intelligence services, hereinafter referred to as the Intelligence Ministry). They searched homes and confiscated items belonging to these and other Bahá'ís in four different localities: Tehran, Ghaemshahr, Karaj and Mashhad.

To date, **37 Bahá'ís are in prison** in Iran. In addition, 78 Bahá'ís, who had been detained and then released on bail, are currently awaiting trial. Nine others were released without bail – it is not known whether they will be charged and tried. Finally, 82 Bahá'ís have been tried and sentenced but are free, to date, pending appeal (or summons) to begin serving out their sentences.

Information on the most recent imprisonments is given below.

### **1.1 New cases**

At 6:30 a.m. on 14 January 2009, Intelligence Ministry officials raided the homes of twelve members of the Bahá'í Faith in **Tehran**. The officials confiscated books, materials and photographs related to the Bahá'í Faith, as well as other items such as computers and CDs. Five of the Bahá'ís were arrested and are being arbitrarily detained:

- Mr. Shahrokh Taef
- Ms. Jinous Sobhani
- Mr. Didar Raoufi
- Mr. Aziz Samandari
- Mr. Payam Aghsani

It should be noted that Ms. Jinous Sobhani worked as an assistant at the Defenders of Human Rights Center and at the Organization for Defending Mine Victims. Both of these organizations were founded by Mrs. Shirin Ebadi (Iranian lawyer and Nobel Prize winner). In an interview on 15 January 2009, Mrs. Ebadi said that Ms. Sobhani had been laid off after Iranian government agents had shut down both organizations in December 2008.

It seems that Mr. Golshan Sobhani was also arrested in the morning of 14 January but released a few hours later. Moreover, Intelligence Ministry officials raided Mr. Sobhani's shop, which is currently closed down. The six others were not taken into custody during the raids on their homes.

All five detainees are being held in section 209 of Evin Prison in Tehran, a section reportedly controlled by Iran's Intelligence Ministry (political prisoners and those detained “for reasons of security” are sometimes held in solitary confinement in this section for months without being charged or put on trial). Their cases are under the responsibility of the same examining magistrate in charge of the cases against the Bahá'í leadership – the seven who have been arbitrarily detained for over eight months in Evin prison's section 209 (see 1.2, below). Family members of the five Bahá'ís arrested in mid-January have been able to meet with this judge. He told them that the amount of time it will take for the detainees to be released will depend on how much they “cooperate”.

On 17 January 2009, the families of the five detainees were permitted to deliver some warm clothing to the prison. On 19 January, Ms. Sobhani had a very brief telephone conversation with her family, and on 21 January Mr. Samandari and Mr. Taef were finally able to call their families, but only for a few minutes.

On 27 January 2009 at his weekly press conference, Mr. Ali Reza Jamshidi (the spokesman for Iran's Judiciary) stated that these individuals had not been arrested because of their religious beliefs, but for having engaged in “propaganda against the regime”.

Furthermore, we have just heard that one of the six Bahá'ís who were not taken into custody on 14 January, when his home had been searched, was summoned for interrogation on 1 February 2009:

- Mr. Nima Haghar.

He obeyed the summons, was arrested and detained in Evin prison the same day.

On 15 January 2009, two Bahá'í students were arrested and imprisoned:

- Ms. Negin Rezaei; and
- Ms. Shabnam Ghazaei.

Ms. Rezaei, from Shiraz, was in **Tehran** to purchase material for her studies. She was arrested together with a group of demonstrators who had gathered around bookstores surrounding Tehran University. The other Bahá'í student, Ms. Ghazaei, was with her at the time and was also detained. About 300 demonstrators were arrested that day, but only 18 were taken into custody, including the two Bahá'í girls. When Ms. Rezaei told the arresting officials that she is Bahá'í, they said that being a member of the Bahá'í Faith was her biggest crime. She was incarcerated in section 209 of Evin prison, the same section referred to above. After two days, Ms. Rezaei was able to contact her parents briefly. She told them she would be detained for a while longer.

In the morning of 26 January 2009, agents from the Intelligence Ministry went to the homes of seven Bahá'í families in Mashhad (Khorasan province). They thoroughly searched the premises of each household and confiscated Bahá'í books, CDs, and all computers. Two members of the community were arrested and detained:

- Ms. Sima Eshraghi (Aghdaszadeh) and
- Mr. Jalayer Vahdat

We have no further details on these latest cases at the moment.

## **1.2 The Bahá'í leadership**

The seven members of the Bahá'í leadership group, who have been arbitrarily detained for more than eight months, still have no access to legal counsel. Family visits are permitted, but never for more than ten minutes and always in the presence of prison officials. All the families were allowed to visit the detainees in mid-October 2008, but Mr. Saeid Rezaie and Mr. Vahid Tizfahm were prevented from having their next scheduled visit on 4 November. All the detainees were able to see their families again on 17 November.

The arbitrary detention (without charge) of the whole group was extended for another two months as of 26 November 2008. Family visits were permitted weekly from 1 to 22 December 2008, and again on 5 and 12 January 2009. The visits scheduled on 18 January were cancelled without explanation, but the families were allowed to come back on 26 January 2009.

It seems that the five Bahá'í men are now incarcerated in the same cell, which is only about 10 square meters in area, with no beds provided for them and other conditions that have also been further restricted. Moreover, the detainees were fingerprinted at the offices of the Public Prosecutor during the week before the visit on 5 January.

Since 12 January, the two women in detention (Mrs. Mahvash Sabet and Mrs. Fariba Kamalabadi) have been held behind a glass partition during visits and have had to use a phone to speak with their relatives. The prison authorities stated that members of these two families had insulted prison officials and that this was their punishment. On 26 January, Mr. Behrouz Tavakkoli was also kept behind a glass window and required to use a phone to speak to his family.

## **1.3 Other recent arrests and imprisonments**

From mid-October to the end of December 2008, over 20 Bahá'ís were arrested or summoned for interrogation. In nearly all these cases, the reports we have received clearly stated that the officials who had carried out the arrests were from the Intelligence Ministry. As usual, the officials also raided their homes and confiscated all belongings related to their religion. Bahá'í books, papers, photographs and other materials were seized during searches of many other homes, as well, belonging to members of the community in various localities throughout the country.

Most of those taken into custody were released on bail after short periods of arbitrary detention, as detailed below.

### **In Yazd:**

- On 11 December 2008, Mr. Rostam Behifar's home was searched, and all Bahá'í materials were confiscated. Mr. Behifar was not home at the time; the officials who conducted the search instructed the family to tell him to come to the local office of the Intelligence Ministry in Yazd. As Mr. Behifar has not received an official summons, he has not done so. It should be noted that he is one of the members of the small, ad hoc group that coordinates the affairs of the Bahá'ís in this city.
- On 23 December 2008 in Yazd, four agents of the Intelligence Ministry raided the home of Mr. Peyman Roohi and seized all materials related to the Bahá'í Faith. No further details are known at this stage.

In **Semnan**: in the early morning hours of 15 December 2008, Intelligence Ministry officials raided and searched the homes of 20 Bahá'í families and confiscated all the Bahá'í materials they found. One member of the local community was arrested. No further information is available at the moment.

In and around **Sari**, a series of arrests took place during this period:

1. Intelligence Ministry officials in Sari summoned, arrested and imprisoned a Bahá'í, Mr. Adil Samimi, on 25 December 2008. He was released on bail on 31 December. The charges against him are not known. In July 2008, Mr. Samimi had been forced to evacuate his shop after officials from the same Ministry had put pressure on his landlord.
2. Also in Sari, a Bahá'í woman, Mrs. Soha Zamani, was detained on 28 December 2008 and released on bail two days later, on 30 December. Her home was searched and all belongings related to her religion were confiscated. No further information is available for the moment.
3. On 4 January 2009, Intelligence Ministry agents searched the residences of five Bahá'ís in Ghaemshahr (near Sari in Mazandaran province): Mr. Sohrab Laghaie, Mr. Hossein Fanaiyan, Mr. Sanaie (first name not known), Mr. Bijan Nokhah, and Mr. Masoud Ataiyan. In this case, too, all the Bahá'í materials in their homes were seized. The following day, the same thing happened at the home of another Bahá'í from Ghaemshahr, Mr. Asadi (first name not known). They were all told that they must go to the offices of the Ministry to be questioned, but in the absence of an official summons in writing, they declined to do so.
4. However, one of these Bahá'ís, Mr. Masoud Ataiyan, had been arrested in November 2008 and *not* released on bail – he is still in prison. His daughter was ordered to go to the Intelligence Ministry in January 2009. On 18 November 2008, Ministry officials had searched his home and confiscated all Bahá'í materials there. He has been granted one family visit and five brief telephone conversations with relatives since his arrest.
5. On 18 January 2009, four Bahá'í women were arrested in Ghaemshahr: Ms. Farzaneh Ahmadzadeh (Fanaiyan), Ms. Emelia Fanaiyan, Ms. Shahnaz Saadati (Nowkhah), and Ms. Taraneh Sanaie (Ataiyan). They were released on bail on 3 February 2009, after over two weeks of arbitrary detention.
6. On 22 November 2008, Mr. Anvar Moslemi and Mrs. Soheila Motallebi of Sari were imprisoned after officials had searched their homes. In 2005, Mrs. Motallebi had already been detained for a month in Sari, subsequently tried and sentenced to three months imprisonment; her sentence had been suspended for five years (the charges laid against her are still not known). Both she and Mr. Moslemi were released on bail on 14 December 2008.
7. About a month earlier, on 18 October 2008, Mr. Ziaollah Allahverdi and his wife, Mrs. Sonia Tebyani, were arrested by order of the Intelligence Ministry in Behshahr (also near Sari in Mazandaran province). The public prosecutor agreed to release them on 9 November, but detaining officials refused on the pretext that another complainant had come forward and additional charges were being laid against them. They were finally released on bail on 3 and 8 December 2008, respectively. The charges against them are not known.

On 27 December 2008, nine members of one family travelled to a vacation spot, **Kish Island** (in Hormozgan province): a Bahá'í woman, two of her sisters, their children –

including two teenagers and a four-year-old child – and two family members visiting from Canada. Their names are as follows:

- Mrs. Nabegheh Foroughi (Moallem Ghamsari), from Canada
- Golbon Foroughi (22 years old), her daughter, from Canada
- Mrs. Faegheh Rafeie (Moallem Ghamsari)
- Mr. Mehran Birjandian (Moallem Ghamsari)
- Mrs. Faezeh Ghaffari (Moallem Ghamsari)
- Ms. Mina Yazdanpanah (Moallem Ghamsari)
- Miss Tabassom Rafeie (17 years old)
- Kimia Ghaffari (18 years old) and
- Shaghayegh Birjandian (4 years old).

They had planned to stay for two nights. While they were in a shop in a mall, a young shopkeeper discovered they were Bahá'ís and asked about their Faith. One of the Bahá'ís had a copy of a book entitled *Bahayian va Ayendye Iran (Bahá'ís and the Future of Iran)*, and gave it to this shopkeeper. Half an hour later, as they were going to take a taxi in front of the mall, Intelligence Ministry agents arrested them all and took them to the local detention centre. They were imprisoned and interrogated for three days. The interrogating official tried to induce them to sign a statement declaring that they had come to Kish to “teach” their religion, and questioned them in detail about how the Bahá'í community functions inside and outside of Iran.

The conditions of detention were appalling. They were not allowed to contact any family members. All of them, including the four-year-old, were held in one small cell and were given only meagre food and bad water. Officials went to their hotel and confiscated their Bahá'í books, notes, and calendars. After two days and one night in detention, five members of the family were released, having been required to sign a statement promising that they would not leave Kish Island.

The four others were kept and forced to endure much harsher interrogation. Three were released the following day. The fourth, Mrs. Faegheh Rafeie (Moallem Ghamsari) was held for one more day and had to provide collateral for bail (a business licence belonging to another Bahá'í). During the interrogation, the Bahá'ís were told that they would be transferred to prison in either Shiraz or Bandar Abbas. Instead, however, they were all brought before a judge, who issued their release and asked them to leave Kish Island as soon as possible.

In addition, we recently heard about two arrests that occurred five months ago:

- On 9 August 2008, after a day of study, Mr. Peyman Rohani went for a walk in a park in **Shiraz**. While he was sitting on a bench there, an elderly man sat next to him and struck up a conversation. When he found out that Mr. Rohani is a Bahá'í, the man asked questions about the Bahá'í Faith, to which Mr. Rohani briefly responded. Then two policemen on motorbikes stopped in front of them and arrested Mr. Rohani, claiming that someone had reported him “teaching” his religion in the park. Mr. Rohani was taken to a police station and, subsequently, to the Intelligence Ministry, where he was interrogated and detained for 10 days before being released on bail on 29 August. At a court hearing on 2 November 2008, Mr. Rohani was told that he had been charged with “activities against the security of the State”. On 26 November, he was summoned to court to receive the verdict and was informed that this charge had been dropped. He was permitted only to read the verdict – court officials refused his request for a copy of it.

- On 27 August 2008, Intelligence Ministry officials raided and searched the home of a Bahá'í family in the small town of **Mehrian** (near Yasouj in Kohgiluyeh va Bouyerahmad province). The raid occurred while the family was hosting a class for some non-Bahá'í children and young people from their neighbourhood. Many of their belongings were seized: Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í books, CDs, pictures and documents. Concurrently, officials searched the home of the facilitator of the classes, Mrs. Rouhieh Yazdani Baghaie in **Yasouj**, and confiscated similar things belonging to her. Mrs. Yazdani is a member of the group of Bahá'ís who coordinate the activities in the local community on an ad hoc basis. She and the couple from Mehrian, Mr. Aliaskar Ravanbakhsh and Mrs. Zolaykha Ravanbakhsh, had been organizing classes on moral education. They were not arrested in August but two months later, on 26 October 2008. All three were detained and repeatedly interrogated at the Intelligence Ministry in Yasouj.

An initial court hearing was held in this case on 17 November 2008. A non-Bahá'í lawyer had agreed to provide legal counsel, but court officials strongly upbraided him for representing Bahá'ís, and he withdrew from the case. The three Bahá'ís were found guilty of “teaching against the Islamic Republic” (carrying a sentence of three years imprisonment) and “involvement in establishing illegal groups and organizations” (carrying a one year prison term) – their sentences thus totalled four years of imprisonment, with two years to be served and two years suspended. They are appealing the verdicts.

Ms. Mahrooyeh Dehghani, a Bahá'í student from **Najafabad** (Isfahan province) has already been interrogated several times by Intelligence Ministry officials. In January 2009, she was summoned to come to the Ministry again. She informed the officials that she would be going to Tehran but would then be back in Najafabad and would obey the summons. On 14 January 2009, she was on her way back from Tehran. When she reached the bus terminal in Isfahan at four in the morning on that day, a stranger came up, grabbed her suitcase and ordered her to get into a car. A female agent was in this car, and they drove around for more than an hour before taking Ms. Dehghani to the local Intelligence Ministry office. The officials confiscated her mobile phone, searched her suitcase, and interrogated her. She was asked to sign a statement declaring that she would not “take any action against the government of Iran” and would not “teach” the Bahá'í Faith. Finally, they warned her that if she continued to conduct Bahá'í activities they would not be responsible for what happened to her. She was then released.

## ***2. Follow up on previously reported cases***

### **In Shiraz:**

Miss Haleh Roohi, Miss Raha Sabet and Mr. Sasan Taqva, the three Bahá'ís still imprisoned in Shiraz, were all granted a 15-day leave to visit their families, beginning on 29 November 2008. This was their third temporary leave since their incarceration on 19 November 2007. On 21 December 2008, they returned to prison and were granted another week (until 3 January 2009); they returned again and received a further extension of one week. The authorities indicated to them that if they were more moderate in their behaviour – for example by not creating agitation over their case through postings on the Internet – perhaps they could secure an early release. They all returned to prison on 10 January 2009.

It should be recalled that these three prisoners were originally arrested with over 50 other young Bahá'ís while working on a humanitarian project. In mid 2007, they were

convicted on spurious charges that they had been engaged in “indirect teaching” of the Bahá’í Faith, which is considered illegal in Iran.

The three Bahá’ís in Shiraz are still serving a four-year sentence, despite having been exonerated by an Iranian official who re-examined the arrests. In a confidential report dated 16 June 2008 (published by *Human Rights Activists of Iran* on 23 October), an “inspector and legal advisor” reported to the “representative of the Supreme Leader in the province of Fars and the Imam Jum’ih of Shiraz” about the case. The investigator, whose name is given simply as “Rustami,” wrote that he had interviewed young participants of the classes led by the Bahá’ís, as well as a retired police colonel, and that all of them had stated that these classes were strictly educational, charitable, and humanitarian in nature, with “no mention of religious or political matters.”

Over seven months later, there is still no indication that the authorities have taken any action to overturn the verdict against the Bahá’ís in Shiraz, which was clearly based on false accusations against them.

#### In Sari:

- Mrs. Simin Gorji of Ghaemshahr, re-imprisoned on 26 April 2008 in Sari less than a month after having been released from imprisonment, was released again on 29 October 2008. The reason for her second arrest and imprisonment remain unknown at this time.
- Mr. Foad Naeimi of Sari, who is serving 30 months of imprisonment that began on 22 May 2008, was recently granted a five-day temporary release. Imprisoned solely because of his religious beliefs, he was being held with convicted murderers, highwaymen and armed robbers in a 3 x 4 meter cell set up to contain 12 prisoners in four tri-level bunks.
- Another resident of Sari, Mr. Faizullah Rowshan, was in the process of serving out a period of exile in the town of Damghan in Semnan province. His one-year prison sentence had been reduced conditionally, and he was allowed visits to Sari during his period of exile under special permits granted by the authorities. But he was unexpectedly re-imprisoned in Sari on 6 December 2008. It seems that his period of internal exile has been changed to an additional six-month prison term, for reasons that remain unknown at this time.

#### In Yazd:

- As you may recall, Mr. Mehran Bandi – who has been imprisoned in Yazd since his arrest on 29 May 2008 – had a heart attack while in detention under the responsibility of the Intelligence Ministry, and spent some time in hospital under intensive care earlier this year. On 13 November, he was taken to a hospital outside the prison, as his health was deteriorating again, but was returned to the prison after his condition had stabilized. A month later, in mid-December, he was granted a temporary leave of one month to obtain medical treatment. Mr. Bandi has suffered both physical and emotional trauma while incarcerated. He is currently serving a sentence of three and a half years in prison, to be followed by three years of internal exile.
- In 2005, a Bahá’í couple in Yazd was arrested for distributing a letter that the Iranian Bahá’í community had addressed to then President Khatami in November 2004. This couple, Mr. Farhang Samadani and his wife, Mrs. Elham Rohani, were subsequently released on bail. Nearly three years later, they were summoned to appear in court recently for their trial. Mr. Samadani was sentenced to one year in prison and his wife to six months. They have both appealed their verdicts.

In **Tonekabon** (Mazandaran province):

- Mr. Siamak Ebrahimi is currently in prison. Arrested 1 January 2007, detained for interrogation, released on bail on 31 January 2007, brought to trial a year later on 2 January 2008, he was found guilty of “organising the activities of the perverse Bahaist sect” and sentenced to six months’ imprisonment plus two years’ banishment to Zabol in Sistan and Baluchistan province. He had to return to prison in early November 2008 to serve out his sentence, which will be for five months, as his month of detention in 2007 has been counted towards fulfilment of the sentence.
- Mr. Badiollah Abolfazli was sentenced to two years’ imprisonment on 28 December 2008, having been found guilty of “being an active member of the Bahá’í community”; “teaching Baháism and being involved in activities against the Islamic Republic”; and “teaching Muslims secretly by providing them with Bahá’í materials”. Mr. Abolfazli, a shopowner, had been arrested at work in July 2008 by an officer of the Intelligence Ministry and taken to Sari prison, where he spent 29 days in solitary confinement. During his detention, he was subjected to verbal abuse and humiliation and interrogated eight times, questioned extensively about Bahá’í administration and activities.

At his initial hearing at the court in Tonekabon on 15 August 2008, Mr. Abolfazli was informed orally of the charge against him – “initiating actions against the Islamic Republic” – but was not permitted to receive confirmation in writing. He was released on bail the same day, after submitting collateral to the value of 100,000,000 tumans (± US \$100,000).

In **Abadeh**: Mr. Mohammad Ismael Forouzan had served out his one-year sentence and had been released, but was ordered to leave Abadeh for 10 years of banishment. No information has been received concerning the location of his internal exile.

**Appeals denied or overturned:**

1. We previously reported that, on 15 March 2008, an appeals court in **Hamadan** had overturned a verdict pronounced against four Bahá’ís in that town, initially found guilty of “teaching against the government of Iran”. We have since learned, however, that the appeals court decision was later referred to another appeals court in Hamadan, on orders from Ayatollah Seyyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, the Head of Iran’s Judiciary. The second appeals court upheld the original guilty verdict. Explaining its decision, the court indicated that it was annulling the ruling in favour of the Bahá’ís on the grounds that (as affirmed by Imam Khomeini) promotion of the Bahá’í Faith is equivalent to denying Islam and the Islamic Republic, and that Bahá’í leaders teach the Bahá’í Faith in Israel. Both of these assertions are false.
2. The authorities are also challenging another recent verdict in favour of Bahá’ís. It should be recalled that Mr. Hormuz Hashemi and Mrs. Mandana Kamali of **Shiraz**, charged with “insulting the sacred institutions of Islam”, were found not guilty by a Public Criminal Court in Shiraz on 19 June 2008. The Intelligence Ministry office in Shiraz has referred the case to an appeals court for reconsideration.
3. Mr. Enayatullah Haghghat of **Shiraz**, found guilty on 30 September 2008 of “teaching against the government of Iran and insulting the sacred institutions of Islam”, was sentenced to one year of imprisonment, suspended for four years. His lawyer appealed on the same day, but the appeal was turned down.

Mr. Haghghat had been arrested following (and in connection with) the expulsion of his daughter from school on 5 November 2007.

4. Three other members of the Bahá'í community, originally arrested and released on bail in May 2005, then tried and sentenced, had their appeal heard in court on 4 January 2009:
  - Mr. Adel Fanaiyan and Mr. Abbas Nourani, two members of ad hoc group that had been organizing the religious activities of the Bahá'ís in **Semnan**; and
  - Mr. Taherverdi Eskandarian, a former member of the ad hoc group in **Qazvin**.

The appeal was denied and they were all sentenced to six months of imprisonment. Officials immediately took the three Bahá'ís to prison to begin serving out their sentences.

### **3. Violence and intimidation**

Further to the recent intensification of persecution against the local community in **Rafsanjan** (Kerman province), a number of Bahá'í families have received anonymous phone calls. It seems that one or more men, who have been calling from different payphones, know many details about the families and have been threatening them with dire consequences if they do not cease their local Bahá'í activities. It was reported, for example, that:

- A man telephoned a local Bahá'í to threaten him, saying that his son would be beaten and killed, and that a Bahá'í in the same town (whose car had been destroyed by arsonists in July 2008) would also be killed.
- Another Bahá'í received threats that his daughter would be burned to death.
- A man told a young Bahá'í woman that acid would be thrown on her.
- A non-Bahá'í who knows some Bahá'í families was also threatened; the caller warned him that his shop would be burnt down and he would be killed if he did not provide detailed information about the local community.

Automobiles belonging to members of the community in Rafsanjan have been attacked and vandalized several times over the past year, and this happened again on 17 October 2008.

We recently heard about a large number of incidents that occurred during the month of October 2008. While few specific details were provided, these incidents illustrate the harassment and intimidation faced by members of the Bahá'í minority throughout Iran. In Karaj (near Tehran), for example, a Bahá'í applied for a permit to work as a taxi driver and was refused, but he was given to understand that the permit could be issued if he agreed to cooperate with the Intelligence Ministry as an informer against the Bahá'í community. A Bahá'í-owned shop in that town was closed for 15 days on the grounds that it had been ruled "unsuitable for the trade", and a Bahá'í family was repeatedly harassed by mobile phone messages (SMS) sent from an anonymous number. In Kerman, corrosive acid was thrown on two Bahá'í-owned cars, and non-Bahá'í landlords were compelled to evict Bahá'í tenants from their homes. In a sermon in Daryoon near the city of Shiraz, the Imam who leads Friday prayers announced to his audience that burning Bahá'í homes is permissible. The Bahá'ís of Daryoon have raised this matter with the authorities.

#### 4. *Attacks on Bahá'í cemeteries*

The Bahá'í cemetery in Darzikola (a small town near **Ghaemshahr** in Mazandaran province) was attacked three times during the period under review. A previous attack on this site had occurred in May 2007. The recent incidents began on 17 October 2008, when a certain number of graves were desecrated. On 23 October, during the early hours of the morning, unknown individuals used at least one bulldozer to cause extensive damage to the cemetery. A report published by the *Human Rights Activists in Iran* estimated that over 80% of the graves had been desecrated. (The report with photos can be found at: [http://hraisean.org/Archive\\_87/1140.html](http://hraisean.org/Archive_87/1140.html).)

Less than a month later, in mid-November 2008, about 20 people approached the same Bahá'í cemetery with a bulldozer, clearly intending to destroy it, but they were stopped by a group of Bahá'ís who were guarding the cemetery at the time. The Bahá'ís stood in front of the bulldozer and refused to move unless presented with an official demolition order – otherwise, they said, the bulldozer would have to run over them to get in. The driver of the bulldozer was given an order to proceed, but he refused and left, then the group of vandals also scattered. Only a few days later, however, at 4:00 a.m. on 21 November 2008, a group of masked men came back to the cemetery with three front-end loaders. A Bahá'í who lives nearby heard the noise and rushed to stop them, but they tied him up and destroyed the cemetery this time.

As soon as they could, the local Bahá'ís took up the arduous task of sorting through the rubble to match the graves with the headstones. The local Bahá'í community had already begun legal proceedings after the attack in October and continued to pursue the matter. Meanwhile, on 19 January 2009 at about two in the morning, some officers from the municipality came to the cemetery again. Using a bulldozer with the lights turned off, they razed it completely.

Recently in **Rafsanjan** (Kerman province), a Bahá'í family faced difficulties in transporting the body of a deceased family member to the cemetery. The ambulance driver employed by the municipality refused to transport the body for burial there. Two months ago, he said, he had received instructions from the deputy minister of the municipality not to transport any bodies to the Bahá'í cemetery because the Bahá'ís did not have permission to bury anyone in that location. On the same day, the local Bahá'í community of Rafsanjan sent a letter to the deputy minister of the municipality in this matter.

On 12 January 2009, government workers entered a cemetery in **Tehran** and destroyed an entire section known as the burial ground of “infidels,” an area where authorities had buried many of the people executed in the years immediately following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Among the graves were those of a number of Bahá'ís who had been members of the national or local Bahá'í governing bodies (Assemblies), during the years before the Bahá'í sacred institutions were banned by the government. These prominent members of the community were rounded up and killed by government agents during waves of persecution in 1980, 1981 and 1984.

#### 5. *Denial of access to employment*

Members of the Bahá'í Faith continue to suffer from employment and work-related restrictions. However, as mentioned on previous occasions, it has become much more difficult for us to obtain information from Iran about individual cases. Throughout 2008, we received reports more sporadically than before, with less detailed information, and this has prevented us from providing confirmed information on individual cases to UN

mechanisms. Nevertheless, we feel it is important to share what we have received, if only to indicate the widespread, targeted nature of the abuse.

For example:

- A recent report from Iran mentions the dismissal of an unknown number of Bahá'í employees from their jobs in Kerman, at the instigation of the Intelligence Ministry.
- Many members of the Bahá'í Faith work independently and are required to have a business license; in additional cases similar to those we have been reporting for the past three years, the authorities in a number of different localities have refused to renew these permits.
- Some businesses owners were recently denied membership in the chamber of commerce in Tehran.
- Others in the province of Isfahan were summoned for interrogation by the Public Places Supervision Office.

In **Karaj**, the Intelligence Ministry asked the manager of a company to submit detailed confidential information on the firm's Bahá'í employees, and the manager refused to do so. He received an official summons to appear at the police station, where officials explicitly expressed their objection to the fact that he was employing two Bahá'í women. The following day, these two women received a summons to appear at the police station, and two other Bahá'ís (also employed by the company) decided to accompany them. They were all interrogated in an offensive and intimidating manner, and their beliefs were denigrated. One of the women is a shareholder in the company; she was questioned for a longer period. Finally, they were all allowed to leave the police station. It is not yet clear whether they have lost their jobs.

We present below the cases involving individuals or small groups about whom we have been able to obtain some specific details:

1. Four Bahá'í women were employed at a health care centre in **Baharestan** (Isfahan province). In late February 2007, two of these women were dismissed from their positions on orders from the Friday Imam (prayer leader) of Baharestan. The director of the health care centre allowed them to continue a training course that they had been attending once a week in addition to their work. About three months later, some time in May 2008, the director asked all four women to understand that he had no choice: he had to let them go because he had received instructions from the police to dismiss all Bahá'ís from the centre.
2. A psychology graduate, who was teaching in a kindergarten in **Kerman**, was fired for no reason other than her adherence to the Bahá'í Faith. The Social Welfare Organization of Kerman, the supervisory body responsible for kindergartens, sent a letter (dated 24 November 2008) to the management of the school with instructions to dismiss her on the grounds that parents had objected to a Bahá'í teaching their children and had demanded that she be fired. The management had been totally satisfied with her services and regretted the circumstances of her dismissal.
3. A Bahá'í musician, who is a highly accomplished performer of the Tonbak (Persian drum) and the piano, has received several prestigious awards. The security office of Mazandaran has now barred him from teaching and performing music. In a similar case, the Centre for Training and Development of the Arts refused to issue a teaching certificate to a Bahá'í pianist from Karaj, after she had passed the required examination. She was told that she would receive the certificate if she renounced the Bahá'í Faith.
4. In **Gorgan** (Golestan province), a Bahá'í man had been distributing optical lenses, working in the same business for over 30 years. He was summoned to the Public

Places Supervision Office and told that his work permit had been cancelled because, the officials said, “there are far too many Bahá’ís” in this line of work.

5. On 25 December 2008, five optical shops owned by Bahá’ís in **Nazarabad** (Karaj) were sealed by the Public Places Supervision Office. The owners were informed that the Ministry of Health had filed a complaint against the businesses (which had been in operation for 10 years), so they had to be closed. The five owners raised the matter with the Ministry of Health and were told that the Ministry had not filed any such complaint with the Public Places Supervision Office. The owners then proceeded to lodge a complaint about the unwarranted closure of their businesses.

On 27 December 2008, one of the shop owners was called to appear before a local court for a hearing: the 3rd branch of the public and legal court of the Justice Administration of Nazarabad. The case was referred to the Court of Administrative Justice, which operates under the supervision of the head of the judicial branch and is authorized to investigate any complaints or objections from people with respect to government officials, agencies, and statutes. No further details are available for the moment.

The Public Places Supervision Office has been mentioned several times in this section. As you will recall, this is the Office that promulgated explicitly discriminatory regulations in 2007 prohibiting Bahá’ís from working in over 25 specified trades. Ever since, the Office has been systematically taking measures against Bahá’ís in these trades, forcing them out of business and depriving them of their livelihood.

## **6. Denial of access to education**

From 22 September to 20 November 2008, 28 reported incidents involved harassment or intimidation targeting Bahá’í children and adolescents in Iranian primary and high schools in six different cities. The largest number of incidents occurred in **Shiraz** and **Isfahan**. Students were insulted by teachers in class and by school administrators in Karaj, Isfahan, Kerman and Gohardashat; threatened with expulsion if they talk about their faith to others in Karaj, Shiraz and Isfahan; and refused enrolment in schools in Boroujen, Karaj and Isfahan. In some schools in these same localities, teachers and school management incited non-Bahá’í students to provoke their Bahá’í classmates by asking them offensive questions about their beliefs. In Karaj (near Tehran), a Bahá’í high-school student was falsely accused of “teaching” his religion to a Muslim classmate, who had submitted a research paper on the Báb, the Prophet-Herald of the Bahá’í Faith. In fact, the young Bahá’í had not associated in any way with this Muslim student, but he was barred from re-enrolling at the school.

As mentioned above, it is now difficult to obtain detailed information from Iran about individual cases. We have heard about one case involving a Bahá’í high school student who was expelled on 5 October 2008 after it became known that she is a Bahá’í. Her school principal had written to the Ministry of Education informing them that this young Bahá’í was enrolled in the school, and requesting that the Ministry take the necessary action. Consequently, she was expelled by order of the Ministry. In this and other similar cases, the authorities are implementing the policy outlined in the 1991 government memorandum that stated: Bahá’ís “can be enrolled in schools provided they have not identified themselves as Bahá’ís.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The full text of the memorandum, obtained and published by the former UN Special Representative on Iran, can be found online at: <http://info.bahai.org/article-1-8-3-20.html>.

On 30 October 2008, anti-Bahá'í presentations were given at two high schools in **Shiraz**. All students from grades 11 and 12, including Bahá'ís, were obliged to attend; it had been announced that any student not present would have marks deducted. At one of the schools, over 200 students attended the presentation.

The director of *Ismat Pre-University Institute* in **Isfahan** told Bahá'í students that the Institute had received a document circulated to all schools in Isfahan (the official source was not indicated). It is an undertaking to be signed by Bahá'í students, stating that they will not “teach”, i.e. talk about or share the tenets of their faith with non-Bahá'ís – should they do so, they would be expelled or refused enrolment. It is not known whether this document has also been distributed in other cities.

Members of the Bahá'í Faith continue to be denied access to higher education. As previously reported, students who took the national university entrance exam in 2008 were instructed to go to a website to obtain their results. All those who had previously been identified as Bahá'ís were diverted to a page with the URL (note the final words): [http://82.99.202.139/karsarasari/87/index.php?msg=error\\_bah](http://82.99.202.139/karsarasari/87/index.php?msg=error_bah), where they received the message: “Error: ‘Incomplete File. Forward correspondence to the Education Assessment Organization c/o P.O. Box 31535-3166, Karaj”.

Four individual cases are detailed below:

1. Last year, we reported on efforts by a number of the students to appeal their cases to relevant authorities. We recently heard about a further case, involving a Bahá'í from **Shiraz** who had been among the hundreds of Bahá'í students denied access to university on the pretext of having an “incomplete file”. She filed a lawsuit against EMEO<sup>2</sup> with the Court of Administrative Justice. On 18 June 2008, the court ruled against her, stating: “in view of the fact that the defendant’s [i.e. EMEO’s] action is in compliance with the sanctions of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, the plaintiff’s case is thus rejected and dismissed”. Once again, the reference to the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council invokes the policy laid down in the 1991 Iranian government memorandum on “the Bahá'í question”.<sup>3</sup>
2. A Bahá'í industrial design student at an arts college in **Isfahan** was expelled because of his religious beliefs while in his third term, in May - June 2008. As he had received only a verbal notification of his expulsion, he asked for official confirmation in writing. Over two months later, following the end of semester exams and announcement of results, he received an “academic dismissal” from the college, dated 10 September 2008. The letter gave no reason for the “dismissal”. The university merely requested him to return all student vouchers and to comply with other routine administrative requirements.
3. A civil engineering student in a private university in **Kerman** was expelled on 27 October 2008, one month after having begun her fifth semester. The head of the university advised her to appeal to EMEO, and she did so. Subsequently, she was referred back to the head of the university to negotiate and resolve the problem, and she wrote a letter to this official, requesting that she be permitted to resume her studies. At the same time, non-Bahá'í university students wrote a

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<sup>2</sup> EMEO is the Iranian national Education Measurement and Evaluation Organization, *Sanjesh* in Persian.

<sup>3</sup> see <http://info.bahai.org/article-1-8-3-20.html>

letter (with over 75 signatories) requesting that this student be granted her right to continue her education and stating that, if this was not done, the university should explain on what legal grounds she had been expelled.

4. Another Bahá'í student took the national university entrance exam in 2008 and was accepted in the field of hospitality (hotel management) at Goldasht College in **Kelardasht** (Mazandaran province), a college affiliated with the University of Applied Science and Technology in Tehran. He began his studies, despite the fact that he had identified himself as a Bahá'í on the college registration forms, which include a mandatory declaration of religion. During the following weeks, he was asked several times to change the entry for religion in his file, but he declined.

The day before the first-term final exams, the director of the college told this Bahá'í student that he was being expelled and would therefore not be permitted to take the exams. When fellow students inquired about why he had not been assigned a seat, a college official initially told them that he had been dismissed from college due to “morality issues”. Later, however, at his request, the dean clarified to the class (of 50 students) that this student had been expelled because of his Bahá'í beliefs. Many of them objected to this, questioning the connection between education and one's religion or beliefs. The following day, over two dozen students refused to take their exams in support of the Bahá'í. Three of these students were summoned by the Intelligence Ministry and questioned about who had instigated the protest. They told the Ministry that it had been their personal choice and that the Bahá'í student had, in fact, asked them not to take this action.

In an effort to calm the situation, the college sent a letter to its main university, requesting permission for the Bahá'í to continue his studies. We do not know the terms of the university's reply, but the college informed him on 8 October 2008 that his education “had been terminated” and he should come to collect his records.

It is profoundly encouraging to the Bahá'ís in Iran when their compatriots take a firm stand – often at considerable risk – against the deplorable attitudes and behaviour of Iranian officials.

## **7. *Incitement to hatred based on religion or belief***

On 10 November 2008, the *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, which is the mouthpiece of the Iranian government) announced the publication of a new anti-Bahá'í book. Entitled *Bahá'ís in the Pahlavi Era* and issued by Kayhan Publications, this book falsely portrays the Bahá'ís of that period as spies and suspiciously influential people occupying key positions in media, government, the military and Savak (the Intelligence Agency under the Shah).<sup>4</sup> As you may recall, 40 articles containing the same slander and misrepresentations were published in *Kayhan*, the ultra-conservative State-sanctioned daily newspaper, from 18 November 2007 to 10 January 2008. Anti-Bahá'í articles have been appearing regularly in *Kayhan* for years, often in long series on a theme. To date, over a hundred articles have been published in its latest series against the Bahá'í Faith, launched on 20 July 2008.

*IRNA* had already issued another anti-Bahá'í article on 23 October 2008. Entitled *Being a Bahá'í from the memoirs of Sobhi*, this published piece recounted the life story

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<sup>4</sup> see <http://www4.irna.ir:80/View/FullStory/?NewsId=220417>

of Fazlollah Mohtadi (also known as Sobhi), a Bahá'í who had been prominent at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but who later opposed the Bahá'í Faith, from the 1930s until his death in 1962. A similar article under the same title had been published in a local Yazd newspaper, *Jame Yazd*, in its edition of 22 September – 6 October 2008.<sup>5</sup>

Also in September – October, a new anti-Bahá'í booklet was distributed in a cultural centre in **Fardis**, a small city in Fars province. The 30-page booklet, entitled *Imprisoned Ideology: an introduction to the perverse Baha'ist sect*, included misinformation about the history of the Bahá'í Faith and its alleged involvement with colonialism and Zionism, most of which was clearly taken from other sources such as *Kayhan* and another national newspaper, *Jam-e-Jam*.

On 4 October 2008, the local weekly newspaper of **Gilavand** (a small city near Tehran) published an article entitled *Fatwas regarding social interaction and business transactions with Bahá'ís*. This article repeated the same widely disseminated misrepresentations of the Bahá'í Faith and its alleged links with colonialism and Zionism, but it also accused the Bahá'ís of being responsible for a recent explosion in Shiraz. Finally, it cited a number of *fatwas*<sup>6</sup> prohibiting all interactions with Bahá'ís.

The same kind of anti-Bahá'í material appeared in another booklet, *Deen Sazan-e-Daghal Baz (Deceitful Religion Makers)*, distributed in **Shiraz** and **Karaj** from September to November 2008. It seems that classes were conducted to study this booklet in and around Shiraz, and the booklet was promoted on anti-Bahá'í websites such as: <http://majima429.blogfa.com>

In **Karaj**, the *Beit al-Noor Qur'anic Cultural Institution* also published a pamphlet about the “dangers of a number of deviant sects”. This pamphlet defined the Bahá'í Faith as a “perverse sect” and linked it to “pernicious cults” such as devil worshipers. It warned the citizens of Karaj of the dangerous influence of these cults on their youth and invited them to take advantage of the services of the institution to learn about the deviant sects.

Yet another anti-Bahá'í pamphlet was distributed to Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í homes in **Shiraz** and **Yasouj**. This pamphlet stated that the people of **Marvdasht** had allegedly asked three Muslim religious authorities, whose edicts are widely followed, about the validity of the Bahá'í Faith: Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi, Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani and Ayatollah Mohammad Behjat (from the office of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei). The Muslim population had allegedly sought guidance about whether Bahá'ís are unclean – i.e. is it permissible to shake hands or share food with them – whether they are impure, and if it is lawful to be involved in transactions with them. The pamphlet quoted the three Ayatollahs as having responded that Bahá'ís are “impure infidels” and that it is not permissible for Muslims to have any association with them; thus the people of Marvdasht should avoid all contact with Bahá'ís. In addition, the pamphlet stated that the office of the Supreme Leader had called on Muslims to confront this “deceitful and immoral sect” as a spiritual obligation.

<sup>5</sup> see <http://www4.irna.ir/View/FullStory/?NewsId=200030>

<sup>6</sup> This commonly used term can refer to any religious opinion on Islamic law issued by an Islamic scholar.

The *Hojjatieh* Society<sup>7</sup> has increased its activities in **Shiraz**. Prominent *Hojjatieh* members are giving anti-Bahá'í classes at police and military academies and in military barracks. Moreover, *Hojjatieh* is conducting a series of courses entitled *Fabricated Religions*, organised for the 20,000 school teachers serving with the Ministry of Education.

*Basij Week*, held from 22 to 27 November 2008, celebrates the anniversary of the Iranian volunteer army's special mobilization during the Iran-Iraq war. An exhibition was organized on this occasion in Azadi Park in **Shiraz**, and one of the stands there was entitled: *Subtle threats, devil-worship, and drugs*. The stand displayed pictures of Bahá'í Holy Places and members of the Universal House of Justice (the supreme legislative body that guides the activities of the global Bahá'í community), as well as some Bahá'í books and a CD introducing the Bahá'í Faith. During the exhibition, anti-Bahá'í propaganda was regularly broadcast over loudspeakers.

In **Gorgan** (Golestan province) at an exhibition held during the annual observance of "Police Force Week" (6 – 12 October 2008), an anti-Bahá'í CD was distributed to all visitors. Similar CDs were handed out at exhibitions held in other provinces on this occasion.

Other anti-Bahá'í material was disseminated, as well, for example on:

- the website *Ayendeh Roushan* (Bright Future), based in Qom – articles here noted that the monthly magazine *Zamaneh* had focused its 61<sup>st</sup> issue (January 2008) on the Bahá'í Faith. This issue had apparently included 17 articles by university professors and researchers, which had titles such as: *Bahá'ism; link with foreigners; enmity with the people of the nation [Iran]; Bahá'ism and Israel: an old and growing link; A history of corruption and dependence*, etc. (15 December 2008)<sup>8</sup>.
- *Borna*, a government-affiliated website designed for youth – a report announced the upcoming publication of an anti-Bahá'í novel entitled *Tabbasom (Smile)*, by Nafiseh Nazari. The novel apparently alleges that Bahá'ís seek to promulgate their Faith in universities (19 December 2008)<sup>9</sup>
- Radio Maaref, a state-run radio network – a weekly anti-Bahá'í programme called *Saraab (Mirage)* is being broadcast on this station, which (according to the website *Ayande-ye-Roshan*) "analyzes the deviant sects, Babism and Bahá'ism". The series is aimed at young people; its stated intention is to inform them about the ideas of "these deviant sects" and to explain to them "the connection between Baha'ism and western colonialism, and the role and support of Russia, England and Israel in the establishment of Baha'ism". It warns listeners about the danger of Bahá'ís' spreading their "propaganda", especially among youth. The 30-minute programmes take the form of round-table discussions by so-called "scholars"<sup>10</sup>.

Finally, reports indicate a steadily increasing number of anti-Bahá'í seminars and talks in recent weeks in various centres throughout Iran, for example:

<sup>7</sup> A semi-clandestine traditionalist Shi'ah organization founded in Iran in 1954 on the premise that the most immediate threat to Islam is the heresy of the Bahá'í Faith, which must be eliminated.

<sup>8</sup> see <http://www.ghatreh.com/news/2724236.html>

<sup>9</sup> see <http://bornanews.com/Nsite/FullStory/?Id=222962>

<sup>10</sup> see <http://tinyurl.com/922bau>

- On 28 December, an anti-Bahá'í seminar for youth was held at the Centre for the Basij of Saheb-al Zaman in **Isfahan**. The event was announced at *Saheb-al-Zaman* Mosque (Mosque of 12<sup>th</sup> Imam) and a poster was distributed to publicize it.
- On 8 January 2009, a seminar entitled *Scientific Critique of Bahaism* was held at the Free Islamic University of **Birjand** (South Khurasan Province). The event was organized by the Islamic Knowledge Association and professors at the Islamic Azad University's branch in Birjand. The attendees included provincial government officials, professors and high school teachers. In the seminar, Hujjatu'l-Islam Ezzud-din Rezazadeh from Qom spoke about "Bahaism" as a deviant sect.
- On 13 and 19 January 2009, the department of planning and programming of the Islamic Propaganda Organization's Office of Education and Research held seminars entitled *Bahaism: Its administrative organization and propaganda activities* at their conference hall in **Tehran**. A full-colour poster announced the events, which included the screening of a film on the same topic.

In this context, it should be recalled that members of the Bahá'í Faith have long been denied access to all means of communication with the public in Iran, and thus cannot counter the lies and calumnies propagated about them and their religion. When Bahá'ís have made attempts to contact newspapers and other media requesting rights of reply, they have been ignored or even mocked for having imagined that they might be granted the means to deny published allegations or to present their point of view – in total contradiction with Article 5 of the Iranian Press Law.

Furthermore, the authorities have repeatedly acted to deny Bahá'ís access to all means of printing or photocopying Bahá'í materials. For many years, Bahá'í books, leaflets and other publications have been systematically confiscated during house searches, along with photocopiers, computers and printers belonging to individual Bahá'ís. This not only deprives the community of the means to produce materials for internal use, but also obstructs its members from providing accurate information in response to the widespread propaganda against them.

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The Bahá'ís have been persecuted throughout their history in Iran, but the oppression greatly increased after the Islamic Revolution. The civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of Iranian Bahá'ís are violated throughout the country.

As mentioned in the introduction, further information and background can be found in the 2008 edition of *The Bahá'í Question – Cultural Cleansing in Iran*. This publication can be downloaded at: <http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/TheBahaiQuestion.pdf> or obtained in a bound edition from Bahá'í International Community representatives.

Related information is also regularly posted at <http://bic.org/areas-of-work/defense> and <http://www.bahai.org/persecution/iran>

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