

Supplementary Report: The Threat of Genocide to the Bahá'ís of Iran

Current to: 20 September 2010
Threat Level: High



The Sentinel Project
for Genocide Prevention

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1.0 DOMESTIC DEVELOPMENTS

The Iranian political environment has become more volatile since the disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on 12 June 2009. The re-established administration has taken firm and controversial measures against political, religious, and public opposition, and has also attempted to censor the media and block communications pertaining to civil unrest, protests, and the government response.^{1,2}

For example, it has been reported that Majid Saeedi, a freelance photographer for Getty Images arrested in 2009, has been sentenced to three years in jail for taking photographs of the 2009 election protests. Saeedi was apparently jailed for sending photographs of the protests to foreign media outlets.^{3,4}

The security environment within Iran has become increasingly tense. Terrorist activities have been reported, and a Sunni rebel leader has been executed on the charge of “Enmity towards God,”⁵ a term used to denote those who commit crimes against the Islamic Republic.

Clearly, religion and national security remain firmly intertwined in the minds of Iranian leaders. On 20 June 2010 there were citizen reports via Twitter of increased military activity in Iran which were corroborated by the Human Rights Activists News Agency.

This news came around the first anniversary of one of last year’s bloodiest protests.⁶ Whether the alleged military mobilization is

due to an anticipated resurgence of protests, the mobilization of US and Israeli naval forces (see section 2.0 International Relations Developments below), or both, remains to be seen.

In the face of economic sanctions, the Iranian government has proposed tax increases which have disappointed the merchant class within the country, further contributing to overall tensions.⁷ Furthermore, fears of a military strike by either the US or Israel still loom over the country.

The Bahá’í community is one of the many groups that have received state-sponsored blame for the civil unrest of 2009. Positive depictions of the Bahá’í community in the media have also faced strict censure, as a long-standing Iranian newspaper was decommissioned for publishing a picture of a Bahá’í temple.⁸ This was allegedly in violation of article 12 of Iran’s Print Law, which forbids any form of media coverage viewed as contrary to the current theocratic order.⁹

The government continues to label Bahá’ís with dehumanizing epithets, and have also maintained accusations linking the community to foreign adversaries (especially Israel and the United States) and particularly with foreign media outlets.¹⁰

As early as 31 March 2010, a Bahá’í representative to the United Nations, Diane Alai, reported that at least fifty Bahá’ís in southern Iran have been restricted from leaving the country. Alai explained that Bahá’ís teaching poor youth in suburban areas were arrested in



A farm building belonging to this family in Fars Province was burned down one night while they slept. Arson attacks against the homes and vehicles of Bahá'ís are a common occurrence across Iran.

Image source: Bahá'í Community of Canada

2006 even though their educational program had no ties to the Bahá'í Faith or the promotion of their beliefs. The reason for the travel ban is unclear.¹¹

The seven Bahá'í community leaders imprisoned in 2008 and later charged with seditious and heretical activities have now concluded a series of trial hearings that began on 12 January 2010. The trial was marked by interference from religious and government authorities.

For example, the third hearing, which took place on 12 April 2010 was adjourned due to the presence of non-judicial parties, which the Bahá'í leaders and their legal representation protested.

The Bahá'í leaders were ultimately sentenced to twenty years in prison, a decision which received much condemnation from human rights organizations as well as US Secretary of State

Hilary Clinton.¹² It was reported in mid-September 2010 that the initial sentence had been reduced to ten years.¹³ The reason for this reduction in sentence is unclear.

Other recent developments show a consistent pattern of anti-Bahá'í persecution despite international pressure and human rights advocacy.

For example, a Bahá'í citizen named Hossein Shayegan, whose home was searched in February 2009, had his business shut down without notification in early 2010. When Shayegan and his lawyer were directed to present documents in court they were both detained and transferred to the Gohardasht Prison.¹⁴ Other arrests occurred in the town of Vilashahr in Isfahan Province involving Bahá'í educators whose homes were also searched.¹⁵

Further incidents have occurred in Isfahan, where fifteen Bahá'í students of the Industrial



Management Institute were expelled, supposedly to “combat discrimination.”¹⁶ A Bahá’í missionary has also been criticized by the state-run media¹⁷ and several Bahá’í citizens are awaiting compensation for the demolition of their homes.¹⁸ Most troubling was an incident on 4 September 2010 in which a Bahá’í storefront was defaced with the slogans “Death to the Israeli Bahá’í” and “Death to the Israeli Bahá’í spy.”¹⁹

Of particular note is the recent desecration of two Bahá’í cemeteries. It is unclear who carried out this action, but it is suspected that there is some degree of state complicity due to the fact that complaints made to the government regarding this incident have been ignored and that a truck driver who had blocked access to one of the cemetery sites admitted he was following indirect orders from the Borujerd Municipality. There is a history of systematic destruction of Bahá’í burial sites in Iran.²⁰

2.0 INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS DEVELOPMENT

The recent domestic developments in Iran have further weakened its relations with the international community. There has been widespread international condemnation of human rights abuses, including the persecution of Bahá’ís, but this has been mainly rhetorical in nature and the issue is generally overshadowed by other concerns, such as those surrounding the Iranian nuclear program.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has “urged Iran to respect the rights of its Bahá’í community and cease persecuting it, discriminating against it and detaining its members.”²¹ Harper further noted that Iran has made no progress in addressing the legitimate aspirations of its people and that its regime has become more repressive.

The government of the United Kingdom also issued a statement regarding the most recent Bahá’í trial hearing, pointing out that “This trial comes at a time when we are remembering the human rights abuses surrounding the elections in Iran a year ago.”²² The Iranian government has rejected these criticisms as mere political ploys against the country.²³

Iranian nuclear ambitions currently dominate international relations for the country. It is widely believed in the international community that Iranian efforts to enrich uranium are intended to produce a nuclear weapon. This concern has led to several rounds of talks and sanctions, as well as a proposal brokered by Brazil in which Turkey would hold Iranian nuclear material in trust to ensure that it is only used for civilian purposes.

However, growing pressure from the United States has prompted Brazil to end its involvement. The Brazilian foreign minister announced that the country would “no longer seek to settle the dispute after the US rejected a Turkish-Brazilian deal with Iran to exchange half Tehran’s stockpile of enriched uranium for nuclear fuel for a research reactor.”²⁴

Iranian responses to international pressure have been obstinate. Iran recently refused access to its nuclear infrastructure for two UN inspectors²⁵ and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has accused US President Barack Obama of interfering in Iranian affairs following calls for greater democracy in Iran.²⁶

The news of non-compliance with nuclear inspection follows a series of sanctions which have already begun to adversely affect Iranian banks.²⁷ Sanctions on Iran have been either drafted or enforced at the European Union, UN, and US levels and include trade and travel bans. Attempts have also been made to prevent other countries from cooperating with Iran.

A US special envoy recently cautioned Pakistan against engaging in a gas pipeline deal with Iran.²⁸ At the time of this writing, however,

Pakistan intended to follow through with the deal in spite of any warnings.

US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates has characterized military developments in Iran as a progression towards tyranny. He has accused the Iranian government of sidelining its religious figures and creating “a much narrower-based government in Tehran.” Gates continued, “the Iranians appear to be moving more in the direction of a military dictatorship.”²⁹

Various international media outlets reported as early as 20 June 2010 that Israeli and American warships have deployed to the Suez Canal presumably in response to nuclear developments.³⁰ Amid rumours that economic sanctions on Iran increase the threat of war, an Iranian news outlet reported the presence of Israeli and American troops outside their borders.³¹

3.0 NON-STATE ACTORS PROFILES

3.1 Ansar-i Hizbullah

The Ansar-i Hizbullah (Persian for “Followers of the Party of God”) is a semi-official paramilitary group with origins that can be traced back to urban street gangs organized by the Islamic Republic during the revolution of 1979.

The majority of members also belong to the Basij militia (see section 3.3 Niruyeh Maghavemat Basij) or are veterans of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. The mandate of the group is the protection of the “integrity” of the Islamic Republic. This is achieved through violent intimidation of those considered enemies of Islam or the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In the past the Ansar-i Hizbullah has been known to disrupt anti-government demonstrations, assault individuals wearing western apparel, and raid shops selling forbidden items. They have also been accused of committing

political assassinations. The Ansar-i Hizbullah rose to prominence after an attack on the Tan University dormitories in July 1999. In response to a peaceful protest, and acting in concert with members of the police, the group beat students and chased them back to their dorms. Two students were killed and twenty others hospitalized.

The government tacitly supports the Ansar-i Hizbullah because of their common goal of maintaining a rigid conservative base of power in Iran. Senior conservative clerics have been said to use such gangs as a means to consolidate their power and remove or intimidate any dissidents.

Although it has no official standing, the Ansar-i Hizbullah complements the current intelligence and security apparatus of the state. Some senior clerics have been said to finance the group for this reason.

As evidence of these allegations, critics claim that during the 1999 Tehran University attack, the Ansar-i Hizbullah members used 1000cc motorcycles, which are standard issue for official security service personnel.

Because of its semi-official nature and the role that the Ansar-i Hizbullah performs in intimidating and suppressing critics of the state, this group fills a strategic niche by having the will and capability to carry out controversial power maintenance tasks for the government while affording it plausible deniability due to its unofficial standing.

3.2 Hojjatieh

The Hojjatieh are a lay religious association which was founded by the influential cleric Sheikh Mahmud Halabi. The group was formed with the express purpose of countering Bahá’í missionary activity and preserving the dominance and integrity of Islam in Iran. The Hojjatieh have been able to exert significant,

though indirect, influence upon the education and worldview of the lay elite leadership of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The Hojjatieh was founded after the Iranian coup d'état of 1953, with the goal of training cadres for the “scientific defence” of Shi’ite Islam in the face of the Bahá’í theological challenge.³² Bahá’í missionaries, or moballeghs, argued that the awaited Shi’ite saviour known as the Mahdi, (also known as Hazrat-e Hojjatiya) had already appeared and been accepted by Bahá’ís; thus, the Bahá’í Faith had essentially superseded Islam.

The Hojjatieh countered with a defence of the Shi’ite position based on a combination of both Islamic and Bahá’í texts. The Hojjatieh have also operated as a fifth column within the Bahá’í community which has succeeded in thoroughly infiltrating the ranks of prominent Bahá’í missionaries.³³

The majority of longstanding Hojjatieh members fulfilled multiple roles. The Bahá’í community responded to the emergence of Hojjatieh by fostering a more defensive and reserved position and avoiding open debates or confrontations. This retreat emboldened the Hojjatieh by giving them the impression that their tactics had been effective.³⁴

The Hojjatieh experienced steady growth and by the early 1970s had spread out over Iran and a few neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and India. In some areas of Iran the Hojjatieh even grew disproportionately concentrated in comparison to the alleged Bahá’í threat, and inspired anti-Bahá’í resentment in other Islamic organizations. These other organizations in turn mimicked the Hojjatieh and recruited from the same pool of religious youth.³⁵

From the 1950s to early 1970s, a significant number of the future elite leaders of the Islamic Revolution were trained by the Hojjatieh.

In addition to their expressed objectives, Hojjatieh had a high degree of dedication,

engagement, and achievement. In concert with institutions such as Ali Asgar (Allama) Karbascian’s Alawi High School, the Hojjatieh represented a traditional Shi’ite Islamic attempt to adapt to the modern landscape and to exploit its capital for the propagation of its worldview.

Under the leadership of Halabi, the Hojjatieh acquired the necessary religious dispensations and written permission to use a portion of tithes (sahm-e imam) from the Shi’ite Grand Ayatollah for its operations. The Hojjatieh suffered a loss of momentum after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The revolutionary leadership were initially sceptical of the Hojjatieh, which caused many defections from the organization.³⁶

It is currently understood that the leaders of the Hojjatieh were committed to a non-violent, persuasive strategy in dealing with Bahá’ís and that the organization did not participate in the persecution of Bahá’ís in post-revolutionary Iran. Despite Halabi’s hostility towards Bahá’ís, he was a disciplined pacifist who repeatedly warned his followers against violence: “This is not the way, this is not our way”.³⁷

However, while the original leader of Hojjatieh was committed to non-violence, there is no guarantee that present members share the same philosophy. It is also unclear what influence that Hojjatieh ideology has on current Iranian political leaders and those who are not opposed to using violence in the perceived defence of Islam and the state. For example, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is alleged to have ties to Hojjatieh through some of his former clerical mentors but the details of these links are unknown.³⁸

3.3 Niruyeh Moghavemat Basij

The Niruyeh Moghavemat Basij (Persian for “Mobilization Resistance Force”) is a vast paramilitary organization which, like the Ansar-i

Hizbullah, fulfills a multitude of roles and acts as the eyes and ears of the Islamic regime. The Basij operate within schools, universities, and private and state institutions, as well as factories and tribes.³⁹

The Basij were formed by order of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in November 1979 with a mandate to defend the Islamic regime from both domestic and foreign threats. During the eight-year Iran-Iraq War roughly 700,000–800,000 Basij volunteers were sent to fight on the frontlines.

Due to a lack of access to military equipment these volunteers used human wave tactics in battle and suffered devastating casualties. Due to their level of commitment and sacrifice, the Basij earned a place among the five main components of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) along with the Quds Force, army, navy, and air force.⁴⁰

Following the Iran-Iraq War, the Basij were reorganized and developed into one of the regime's main guarantors of domestic security. Although initially poorly trained and equipped, the importance of the group increased significantly and their numbers rose drastically.

Reports by Basij commanders on the full strength of Basij membership are likely exaggerated but it has been noted that Basij may be able to mobilize 1.5 million men and women of military age at any given time.⁴¹

Since Major-General Mohammed Ali Jafari took command of the IRGC on 1 September 2007, the Basij have received considerable organizational and logistical support from the IRGC. It is important to note, however, that the organizational structure of, and training received by, the Basij varies from province to province.

Overall, their mission involves acting as a sort of “morality police” enforcing the ideological and Islamic values enshrined by the regime, combating the “Western cultural

onslaught,” and assisting the IRGC in defending the country against foreign threats and domestic unrest.⁴²

The Basij enjoyed a relatively independent structure until 2009. Due to their previous reluctance in following orders blindly and inability to control protests in post-election unrest government officials began to second-guess their commitment and capability. As a consequence of this the Basij was annexed within the IRGC structure.⁴³

The Basij have proven to be a diverse and accomplished paramilitary group, particularly during the 2009 post-election protests. Iranian Activist Janet Afary notes that the Women's Wing of the Basij was crucial in quelling the demonstrations. The Women's Wing recruits women ranging in age from 18 to 38 and is tasked with countering female resistance and handling the arrests of women involved in protest activities.

Overall, the Basij has remained on the frontlines against political opposition.⁴⁴ It was reported that at least 50 plainclothes Basij militia members attacked the prayer hall of the Imam Khomeini's House in Tehran, violently interrupting a speech by the former president and current opposition leader Mohammad Khatami.⁴⁵

4.0 CONCLUSION AND THREAT ASSESSMENT

At least one execution (of Sunni rebel leader Abdolmalek Rigi) has been carried out on religious grounds and the distinction between political and religious offences in Iran remains narrow. The Iranian economy will likely decline following recent sanctions and it is possible that popular perception will increasingly link Bahá'ís with increased opposition from foreign states.



For example, the presence of American and Israeli ships in the region may be detrimental to the treatment of Bahá'ís since they have been linked to both countries in Iranian propaganda. This possibility is increased by firm Iranian government control of communication flows and the media, giving them free reign to broadcast their own messages about Bahá'ís while also silencing dissenting voices. Examples of this were seen following the 2009 election when the government blamed Bahá'ís for protests while dismissing human rights criticism as a political ploy to destabilize the country.

It is highly likely that the issue of Iranian nuclear ambitions will continue to dominate international relations with the country and the media attention paid to it. Even after the June 2009 post-election violence brought Iranian human rights violations into the international spotlight, the focus of reporting on the country quickly returned to its suspected nuclear weapons program.

The US and other Western countries will be particularly focused on preventing Iran from developing such weapons and the nuclear issue will probably overshadow all other developments in Iran for the foreseeable future.

While NGOs will continue to advocate stronger measures for improving the rights and freedoms of Iranian citizens, it is unlikely that governments will take significant action. Even within the realm of human rights, the Bahá'í situation will be particularly underrepresented in international discourse on Iran, though any major violent events are likely to draw temporary attention.

There is a possibility that increased media reporting on the persecution of Iranian Bahá'ís could have beneficial effects. The Iranian government has shown in the past that it desires a positive public image and is sensitive to international pressure, particularly on issues not directly related to national security.

International media attention has helped in the past to overturn convictions and reduce harsh sentences for dissidents and those believed to be wrongfully accused.

It is unclear at this time if there may be such a relationship between international attention and the reduction of sentences for the seven imprisoned Bahá'í leaders, but such a connection would not be surprising.

If human rights organizations are able to effectively report the persecution of Bahá'ís and gain media and governmental attention for the issue it may be possible to at least temporarily discourage further escalation of abuses.

The threat of genocide to Iranian Bahá'ís remains high and may only be awaiting the right trigger event, such as a foreign military strike or serious internal challenge to the regime. There has been no improvement in the situation since May 2009.

With the senior Bahá'í leadership now imprisoned with long sentences, the community lacks representatives to communicate their needs and complaints to the government. Any individuals who try to step in and fulfill this role are likely to be monitored and eventually targeted as well. The re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a negative development for two main reasons.

First, Ahmadinejad is a zealot committed to "continuing" the Islamic Revolution and its ideological goals, which do not leave room for tolerance of religious minorities, especially Bahá'ís.

It is unclear whether Ahmadinejad continues to have ties with the Hojjatieh, as in his younger days, but any such influence would be significant.

Second, the post-election violence demonstrated that the Iranian government is more than willing to use lethal force to maintain internal order.

The Bahá'ís of Iran face a grave threat to their existence. They, along with persecuted peoples all around the world, need your assistance to enjoy a safe future. Contact your government representatives and media outlets to ensure that human rights in Iran receive their attention.

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