

Iran's Increased Persecution of the Bahai

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Brief Analysis

Targeting the faith's followers is a longstanding feature of the Islamic Republic but has been escalating of late.

On January 18, a court in Iran's Mazandaran province ordered that property belonging to Bahai citizen Sheida Taeed be confiscated and transferred to the "Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order," a committee controlled by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Authorities had previously arrested Taeed in September on undisclosed charges. Apparently, the seizure order relied on a past regime fatwa stating that Bahai "properties and estates are not legitimate" and therefore belong to the religious authorities.

Similarly, two courts declared last year that the land ownership claims of twenty-seven Bahai in the village of Ivel were illegal. The village is located in Mazandaran, the province that gave birth to the faith's founders and is now home to one of the largest Bahai communities in the country. Examining the mechanisms and reasoning behind the escalating oppression of these communities provides a useful window into the regime's current methods of retaining power.

The State's Conspiratorial Views of the Bahai

Although followers of the Bahai faith accept the legitimacy of Islam—including the Twelver Shia branch, Iran's official religion—regime clerics have viewed them as potential challengers from the very beginning of the Islamic Republic. The Bahai believe that doctrines regarding the Twelver Shia messiah (the Mahdi) became irrelevant once the emergence of their own faith superseded Islam. To be sure, this view is not presented in confrontational terms—the Bahai faith is one of the most peaceful religions on the planet because it rejects violent conflict of any sort. Yet the Bahai also firmly believe it is their duty to proselytize their religion far and wide. And since belief in the Mahdi is arguably the main pillar of Twelver Shia, the regime feels it must forcefully prevent the expansion of a faith that

rejects this belief.

Accordingly, Iran's Shia establishment has worked hard to deny Bahai's status as a religion. In various undated fatwas posted on his official website, Khamenei himself has called the Bahai "impure" infidels and "enemies" of the Shia faith, exhorting his followers to "avoid any sort of socialization with such a misguided and misleading sect." He also emphasized that "all believers should confront [Bahai] ruses and perversions...and prevent others from being perverted by joining them."

In addition, regime officials frequently cast the faith as a Western or Zionist plot to divide the Muslim community. In their view, the fact that the Bahai world headquarters is located in Israel proves that the faith's leaders are conspiring with the "Zionist regime." Ironically, Iranian Jews are not accused of being Zionist spies by default, but the Bahai are automatically considered to be security threats and Zionist agents (though other forms of regime pressure on Jews are well-documented, as discussed below).

An Illegal Social Reality

I ran's constitution is the only one in the Muslim world that specifies a branch of Islam—Twelver Shia—as the country's official religion. The document also recognizes three other faiths as "religions of people of the book": Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. With this provision, the Islamic Republic essentially categorized followers of these faiths as second-class citizens who could enjoy legal rights and protections so long as they refrain from proselytizing their religions and do not otherwise become security threats in the eyes of the regime.

Yet the drafters of the 1979 constitution faced a dramatic dilemma when it came to the Bahai. On one hand, the faith was not tolerable within a Twelver Shia state due to the ideological factors described above. On the other hand, the existence of a sizable Bahai community inside Iran was a sociological fact. This dilemma remains unsolved today, in large part because expressing one's freedom of conscience is not a recognized right in the republic's rhetoric or founding legal documents.

Government Pressure and Backlash

I n response to this dilemma, the regime has long resorted to systematic oppression, discrimination, and violent intimidation against the Bahai in the hope of forcing them to flee the country en masse. Hundreds of the faith's leaders and notable figures have been killed, imprisoned, and robbed of their properties over the years. Others have been kept from studying in universities; according to the State Department's 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices in Iran, "Authorities barred Bahai students from higher education and harassed those who studied through the unrecognized online university of the Bahai Institute for Higher Education." Bahai are also prevented from holding jobs in government-related entities, while propaganda against their faith has become embedded in the state's educational system, cultural production, and media content. Followers are even barred from peacefully mourning their dead in public and building their own cemeteries.

This all-encompassing pressure is meant to delete the problem instead of solving it. The regime is confident in this tactic because it has been used successfully before against another faith—Jews faced various pressures to leave the Islamic Republic for years, and their numbers are now just one-fourth of what they were before the revolution, when around 100,000 of them called Iran home. The remaining Jewish community is more or less tolerated because it lacks interest in proselytizing Judaism, among other factors.

Yet the Bahai are more numerous in Iran than Jews, largely because of their imperative to proselytize. They are also more demographically scattered and more integrated into general society. And despite all the pressure and injustice they have faced, many of them still have no desire to leave the country, especially the older generation. In their eyes, Iran is both their homeland and the birthplace of their religion, so their spiritual and emotional connection to the country is very strong.

Moreover, the Bahai faith first emerged among elite strata of Iranian society, so it remains quite appealing to elites today, even some Shia clergy. The regime is particularly worried about the faith's appeal to young Shia, who may see Bahai as more compatible with modern life than traditional Shia teachings—likely a key reason behind the recent uptick in government pressure.

The Islamic Republic has resorted to a totalitarian approach in the hope of snuffing out such challenges. In many cases, political critics and religious “opponents” like the Bahai are deprived of their human and citizenship rights, which essentially dehumanizes them and turns them into stateless subjects. Yet these practices by an avowedly Islamic regime have tarnished the image of Islam in the eyes of many Iranians, especially the younger generation. Conversion to other religions or atheism appears to be increasing in reaction to the regime's behavior at home and abroad.

Conclusion

Although Tehran cares little about human rights at home, it does care deeply about its international image. In the regime's view, obfuscating or denying the worst aspects of its dismal human rights record can help build trust with foreign countries, which may in turn allow for more economic activity and ease the risk of absolute delegitimization. Therefore, how Western countries react to the regime's abuses can make a difference in how minorities are treated. American reactions are paramount, since U.S. sanctions and international penalties that emerge from U.S. pressure are what hurt the regime most. Sanctions that specifically target Iranian human rights abuses have rarely been counterproductive, so there is little to criticize about them in cost-benefit terms.

The U.S. government should also consider emphasizing constitutional reform in Iran, particularly efforts to recognize freedom of conscience and equality of all citizens before the law. Although such issues will presumably be covered in the State Department's next International Religious Freedom Report (typically issued each April), Washington should address the matter before and beyond that report as well. This means raising human rights issues in any negotiation with Iran, including the ongoing nuclear talks in Vienna. The regime's abuses on this front should be seen as an inextricable part of its identity, vision, and general behavior—now more than ever, the factors that lead Tehran to violate human rights at home are the same drivers behind its destabilizing regional activities and expansionist military agenda abroad.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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