

# The Baha'is of Iran and Contact with Foreign Nations

Mar 31, 2009



Articles & Testimony

**C**oncurrent with the increase pressure on the Baha'is, once more the Islamic Republic of Iran has declared activities of the followers of the Baha'i Faith illegal.

In his letter to the Minister of Intelligence, Iran's Attorney General, Qorban-Ali Dorri Najafabadi, has accused the Baha'is of connection with Israel and of gathering of information for the "Zionist regime". He has written that the activities of the Baha'is in Iran will endanger national security and the nation's geopolitical integrity.

### Conspiracy and the Baha'i Faith

Since the Baha'i Faith is a global entity and is not bounded by any geographical lines, it has been accused of breaking through "national identity and Iranian religiosity" from its very inception in the middle of the nineteenth century. Likewise, its birth and diffusion has been ascribed to the efforts and designs of authorities in such governments as Russia, the Ottoman Empire, England and Israel.

In the history book taught to the third graders (under the education program of the Islamic Republic of Iran), there an section under the heading, "Colonialism through Creating Sects", where it is stated, "The British and Russian governments were deeply frightened by the unity of Muslims in Iran. For this reason, they endeavored to cause division among the people and to destroy their oneness. One of the things they did to create this division was to create makeshift religions. Among these false and manmade religions was Babism and Baha'ism . . . The claim of Siyyid Muhammad-Ali [sic] the Bab caused a great convulsion and for this reason it is known as the 'The Babi Sedition'. He created the Babi sect for this purpose was supported by the Russian and British governments."

### Rivalry of Azalis and Baha'is, the First Promoter of Conspiracy Theories

However, where does this allegation comes from? The root of the connection between Baha'is and foreign nations is several-fold.

During the initial stage in the history of the Baha'i Faith, its neighboring religious branches, such as the Azalis, first fired this arrow of allegation. Based on what Mrs. Mangol Bayat has written in her book, *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909*, Azalis were active in the constitutional movement -- and from a religious perspective, were rivals of the Baha'is. They tried to raise questions about the legitimacy and authenticity of the Baha'i Faith by suggesting "connections with foreigners".

Azalis were the followers of Mirza Yahya Nuri, surnamed Azal, who was a successor of Muhammad-Ali [sic] the Bab. At first they believed in the necessity of jihad [religious struggle] and armed removal of the Qajar government.

Mirza Husayn-Ali Baha (later Baha'u'llah), was a half-brother of Mirza Yahya Nuri from his father's side. After a while, the two brothers clashed over the successorship to their father, which resulted in deep enmity. [Editor's correction: Baha'u'llah had raised Azal since childhood; when He raised the claim to Prophethood, Azal rejected Baha'u'llah's claim. A division took place at that time and had nothing to do with their father's successorship or estate.] The Babis were divided into two branches -- Azalis and Baha'is. The Azali group did not last long and soon

disappeared. However, the Baha'is flourished and presently live in every country of the globe.

On the other hand, based on what Mansour Bonakdarian writes in his book, *Britain and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911: Foreign Policy, Imperialism and Dissent*, conversion of a number of Jews to the Babi and Baha'i religions, and also adaptation of the Baha'i faith by a number of British citizens, raised suspicions about the connection between Babis and Baha'is with "foreigners".

Even though the published official documents of the British Foreign Ministry demonstrate that this Ministry did not have a positive view of the Constitutional Revolt [of 1905-11], certain individuals like Edward Brown, the prominent scholar of Iran, became close supporters and allies of the Babi and Baha'i leaders.

It is worth noting that from the inception of Baha'ism, a large number of Shiite clerics and individuals from other religions, such as Zoroastrianism, converted to this religion as well.

#### Anti-Baha'ism, an Echo of Anti-Israel and Anti-American Sentiments

In 1868, after increasing differences between the two branches of the Babis, and reciprocal killings between the Azalis and the Baha'is, the Ottoman government took Mirza Yahya Nuri and Husayn-Ali Baha, who had been sent to Istanbul from Iran, to court.

The court exiled Mirza Yahya and his family and followers to the island of Cyprus, and Husayn-Ali Baha and his family and supporters to Akka, near Haifa (Palestine).

The Ottoman government was mostly under the influence of rumors spread by the Iranian authorities, who persisted in suggesting that Husayn-Ali Baha and his followers were in contact with Bulgarian revolutionaries and were a threat to Ottoman rule.

Baha'u'llah made Akka and Haifa the headquarters of his religion. Around the same time, Theodor Herzl in 1890s established the Zionist movement. The government of Israel came into being in 1948 in a region known as Palestine. The inauguration of the Zionist movement, formation of the nation of Israel and geographical position of the center of the Baha'i Faith were coincidences that became a new pretext for advancing conspiracy theories about the relationship of Baha'ism with the Jewish government of Israel.

In the context of anti-western proclivities, the closeness of the United States to Israel, and protests of western countries (as well as Russia) against anti-Baha'i repression, made the Baha'is targets of vehement attacks -- particularly once clerical rule was established, the Baha'is of Iran were stripped of their citizenship rights.

#### Secular Intellectualism and Conspiracy Theories

The claim that foreigners had a role in the establishment and spread of the Baha'i Faith is not something created by the Islamic Republic or by current Shiite clerics.

In the early 1940s a book titled *The Political Confessions or Memoirs of Prince Dolgoruki: The Secrets of the Appearance of the Babi and Baha'i Religions in Iran* was published, in which the Baha'i Faith was presented as a creation of the hand of colonial powers, such as Russia.

This book, which is dismissed by many experts, such as Ahmad Kasravi, as a forgery, attempts to sever the line connecting the Babi and the Baha'i Faiths with Shiism and Islam, and presents them as a sudden and foreign phenomenon.

During the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, anti-Baha'i activities subsided to some degree. However, new waves of anti-Baha'i sentiment reemerged once again with the emergence of the monarchy of Muhammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi.

During this period, some Baha'is who had left the fold wrote certain books against the religion, and at some length they once more raised the issue of the connection of Baha'ism with foreign nations. In this regard, they exerted an

influential role in enhancing suspicions against Baha'is.

Among these writings, in the book *Tarikh va Naqsh Siyasi Rahbaran Baha'i* [History and the Political Role of Baha'i leaders] by Murteza Ahmad A. (penname, Yafteh Publisher in 1344 [1965]), Baha'ism is defined as a "manufactured religion" created solely for the purpose of "waywardness and division among the citizens of the nation".

Similarly, the author suggests that the Babi and Baha'i leaders at the beginning were "deep devotees of the glorious Russian government", afterwards benefited from the "support of the Ottoman government", and eventually "begin espionage for the British government".

Fereyduun Adamiyat, the renowned historian of the Constitutional Revolt, in his book, *Amir-Kabir va Iran* [Amir-Kabir and Iran], regards Baha'ism as a creation of British espionage and claims that Arthur Conolly, a British intelligence officer, has spoken in his travelogue about his connection with Mulla Husayn Bushruiyh, the first believer in the Bab.

From Adamiyat's perspective, without support from foreign nations such a religion could not have endured and would have soon disappeared. Of course, at a later time, he recognized that the attribution to Arthur Conolly was incorrect, and removed it from subsequent printings of his book.

In his book *Baha'igari*, the author, Ahmad Kasravi, the well-regarded historian of the Constitutional period, accuses foreign governments such as the British of providing support to Baha'i leaders. He writes, "After the British conquered Palestine, 'Abdu'l-Baha, the son and successor of Baha'u'llah, asked for the title of 'Sir' from that government. When it was bestowed, the day that the Order of Knighthood arrived, there was a large festival in Akka, and music was played."

Kasravi's allusion is to the later years of Abdu'l-Baha in Palestine. In the years that coincided with World War I, British power enveloped Palestine during the war in Haifa and subsequent to it. For this reason, they guaranteed the safety of Abdu'l-Baha and his Baha'i followers. Afterwards, as a reward for Abdu'l-Baha's humanitarian activities during the war years, the British government granted him the title of "Sir".

There is no historical evidence that Abdu'l-Baha himself ever wanted the title "Sir".

#### Violation of the Rights of Citizenship in the First Constitution of Iran

One of the goals of the Constitutionalist was to make all the "servants of Iran" equal before the law, regardless of race or religion. Later this was achieved as Article 8 of the Constitution, which was ratified in 1906.

Despite this, the group of Constitutionalist who were in favor of aligning the Constitution with Islamic law were eventually able to deprive non-Muslim Iranians, including Jews, Christians, Babis and Baha'is, of equal rights with other citizens. They also succeeded in ensuring that the same document deprived these minorities of representation in national parliament or from being given ministerial status.

#### Conspiracy Theory and the New Movement

The appearance of a new movement, an independent religion or a political power is constantly exposed to fresh threats. For this reason, accusing new movements of being against the masses, anti-religion or against the government is not unprecedented, and occurs in every instance.

The history of religion is filled with clashes between established and central religions and those on the periphery: This is the case with religions before Islam in Iran, as well as with Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Each one in their own time had to face such slander and vilification.

Even Shi'ism, which today in Iran is considered the official and legal state religion, at the beginning of its formation was accused of being created by Jews for the destruction of Islam (Sunni religion). Many among the followers of

Sunni Islam consider a certain 'Abdu'llah ibn Saba (who was a Jew and a resident of Kufih) as the one who formed the Shi'ite sect -- a charge that Shi'ites reject.

Conspiracy theory is the easiest way to construe the emergence of any new entity. However, from a historical point of view, it is not an effective way to confront and defend against such emerging faiths. Many movements that internally have had the ability to sustain themselves have managed to continue their development despite such accusations or appeals to conspiracies.

On the other hand, we must differentiate between two theories: (1) a theory that fundamentally considers the Baha'i Faith to be a creation and effort of foreigners and does not recognize in it any internal drivers that stem from cultural, historical and Islamic-Shi'ite roots; (2) a theory that sees the Baha'i Faith as a movement based on an apt relationship between a cultural, religious and political axis of Iranian society which has gained the support of foreign nations.

Historical research and analysis does not support the first theory, but the same studies indicate that Baha'i leaders enjoyed the support of foreign nations. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the support of foreign nations for marginal religions and sects is not limited to the contemporary era. For instance, from a historical perspective, very few researchers doubt that the Mogul attack on the Islamic realm, which resulted in the fall of Baghdad and lessening of the central power of the Muslim Caliphs benefited smaller sects, such as the Shi'ite sect. Likewise, the collaboration and alliance of Shi'ite leaders and high-ranking clerics, such as Khawjeh Nasir'd-Din Tusi, with Mogul principals is beyond historical dispute.

Baha'is and the Silence of Intellectuals

Faced with persistent and focused attack on Baha'is, either before the 1979 revolution or afterwards, Baha'is have been deprived of the means to defend themselves.

This one-sided propaganda supported by the government, which has been accompanied by many episodes of intense persecution and attempts at genocide, has not only impacted the view of common people, but has also had a lasting influence on non-religious intellectuals.

Only recently a number of Iranian intellectuals in a letter have expressed their shame for their long and inexcusable silence over the violation of the human rights of the Baha'i citizens. However, few among the signatories of this document live in Iran, and most well-known contemporary intellectuals are not signatories to this document.

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