

## CHAPTER I

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# Overview

*“Everyone has the right to education.”*

— UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

**I**N THE PUBLIC mind, the right to education does not always rise to the highest level of concern. Other basic human rights — especially those concerned with rights to life, liberty and personal security — often seem more urgent. And to be fair, instances of innocent people being executed, thrown into prison, or tortured demand our immediate attention and action.

Yet in the long view, the denial of a person’s right to education is equally a denial of his right to exist as a free and productive human being. For without education, the individual is condemned to the prison of his own ignorance, tortured over his lack of opportunities, and, more than likely, consigned to a life of poverty, underdevelopment, and oppression.

It is a terrible tragedy that so many millions of people around the world are unable to exercise their basic right to education. In most cases, however, it is not a matter of will but of resources. In the developing world, especially, many governments simply do not have the infrastructure to provide their young people with an adequate education.

But it is an entirely different matter when a government willfully seeks to deprive its people— or a group of its people — from receiving an education. Sadly, that is the case in present day Iran.

Since 1979, the government of Iran has systematically sought to deprive its largest religious minority of the right to a full education. Specifi-

cally, the Islamic Republic of Iran has for more than 25 years blocked the 300,000-member Bahá’í community from higher education, refusing young Bahá’ís entry into university and college. The government has also sought to close down Bahá’í efforts to establish their own institutions of higher learning.

This action comes against a wider picture of

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persecution of the Iranian Bahá’í community that has included arbitrary executions, unjustified imprisonment, the confiscation of property, and severe restrictions on freedom of religious practice and worship. Since the Islamic government came to power, more than 200 Bahá’ís have been killed, hundreds have been imprisoned, and thousands have had property or businesses confiscated, been fired from jobs, and/or have had pensions terminated. Bahá’í holy sites have been destroyed, the community’s elected administrative structure has been dismantled, and Bahá’ís have been denied

a host of other rights, ranging from freedom of movement to simple inheritance rights.

Against that backdrop, the efforts of the Iranian government to deny Bahá'ís the right to education can only be seen as a coordinated effort to eradicate the Bahá'í community as a viable group within Iranian society.

Indeed, a careful examination of Iran's persecution of the Bahá'í community reveals that the Iranian government has long sought specifically to completely block the "progress and development" of the community — as outlined by the government in a "secret" memorandum that surfaced in 1993. [See *Iran's Secret Blueprint for Repression*, page 9.]

In the face of an international outcry over the most blatant elements of its oppressive behavior, the Iranian government has in recent years plainly acted to moderate its violations. The killing and imprisonment of Bahá'ís has largely been halted.

Yet any fair-minded reading of the situation reveals that the government has not abandoned its ultimate objective of destroying the Bahá'í community — and that it persists towards this goal while seeking trade and other forms of favorable treatment from the West.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the government's continuing effort to prevent Bahá'ís from obtaining higher education.