

The Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education

IN WHAT THE *New York Times* called “an elaborate act of communal self-preservation,” the Bahá'í community in 1987 established its own higher education program to meet the educational needs of young people who had been systematically denied access to higher education by the Iranian government.

Over the years, the program evolved into a full-fledged university, known as the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE).

By mid-1998, the Institute had an enrollment of some 900 students, a faculty of more than 150 first-rate academics and instructors, and complete course offerings in ten subject areas. It operated largely by correspondence, with small classes in private homes, but also had a small “infrastructure” composed of various classrooms, laboratories and libraries scattered throughout Iran. Yet its offerings were so well regarded that a handful of early graduates had managed to win admission to top-flight graduate schools overseas.

Most of the classes of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education were held in private homes, like this one, which shows a professor at an easel with his back to the camera.



Then, in 1998, agents of the Iranian government staged a series of sweeping raids in late September and early October, arresting at least 36 members of the BIHE's faculty and staff and confiscating much of its equipment and records, which were located in over 500 homes. Those who were arrested, many of whom have now been released, were asked to sign a document declaring that BIHE had ceased to exist and that they would no longer cooperate with it. The detainees refused to sign any such declaration.

Indeed, the Bahá'í community's efforts to provide its young people with a higher education have continued — as have the government's attempts to shut down those efforts.

Early in 2001, three classrooms used by members of the community were seized in another strike against the Bahá'ís' right to education. In 2002, one of the instructors who was teaching Bahá'í youth in the city of Qaim-Shahr was

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The BIHE relied heavily on the use of extensive photocopying, and one of the biggest blows in the 1998 raids was the confiscation of several large photocopying units.



The Bahá'í community of Iran Speaks

IN NOVEMBER 2004, the Bahá'í community of Iran addressed a letter to Iranian President Mohammed Khatami, addressing specifically the government's duplicity in offering university enrollment to Bahá'í youth but then falsely recording them as Muslims, effectively excluding them from higher education. The letter also examines the nature of the persecution the Bahá'ís in Iran have faced for more than 25 years, suggesting that not only does international law condemn such oppression, but so does the Qur'an and Islamic law. Here follow excerpts from the letter:

15 November 2004

The Esteemed Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran Mr. Khatami

For more than 161 years, the Bahá'ís have been exposed, in the sacred land of Iran — the native soil of their forefathers in whose name they take pride — to a series of abuses, tortures, murders and massacres and have tolerated numerous forms of persecution, tragedy and deprivation, for no other reason than believing in God and following their Faith, the largest religious minority in Iran. Contrary to all religious, legal and moral standards, and supported by existing official documentation, they have been, individually and collectively, the subject of unwarranted discrimination and various injustices.

Day after day, the pressure against this wronged community became more intense and the scope of the injustice and infringement of their rights in various aspects of their lives more overt, such that their possessions, their homes, their jobs and their very existence were the target of attacks.

From the perspective of the holy religion of Islam, people are free to choose and follow their own religion, and no one has the right to impose his religion on another. The following noble verses “Let there be no compulsion in religion...” and “To you be your Way, and to me mine” confirm this point. From the perspective of the holy religion of Islam, no one has the right to attack and violate the properties, the life and the dignity of those who live under the banner of this religion, which is to be secure and protected: “...if anyone slew a person—unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land—it would be as if he slew the whole people...”

The equality, the freedom and the inalienable rights of all members of the human family, without discrimination as to race, gender, language and religion, have been unequivocally specified in all international covenants, especially in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Under the rubric of Cultural Revolution, the authorities of the [Ministry of] Culture and Education decided to expel Bahá'í students, some of whom were completing their last term, from universities and other institutions of higher learning in which they were studying. Others were barred from entering these institutions solely because of their adherence to the Bahá'í Faith. Then in 1369 [1990/91], the Council of Cultural Revolution, with reference to a well-planned agenda, openly deprived Bahá'í youth from higher education, thereby denying a number of the youth of this land the opportunity to realize their potential. This situation continued for some 20 years until in Adhar of 1382 [December of 2003] “Peykesanjesh” (the publication of the Ministry of Science) officially announced that for the first time the religious affiliation of applicants would not be included in the application for the [university] national examination, and, instead, applicants would be asked to choose the subject of religious studies in which they would wish to be examined. Owing to the limitation cited in Article 13 of the Constitution, Bahá'í applicants necessarily chose Islamic studies for this examination.

Having received their entrance identification cards and subsequently taking this national examination,

the success of Bahá'í youth, based on the government announcement of results in the first phase, was significant in that some 800 students were qualified to choose their fields of study, of whom hundreds ranked in the one to four digit range [a ranking scale extending to 200,000]. After receiving their test result forms, however, the Bahá'í applicants were surprised to see that their religion was specified as Islam. This duplicity astounded the Bahá'í community. Alas, the joyful news that the question about the religion of the applicants had been omitted from the national university entrance examination, which was a reflection of freedom of belief and a sign that the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran was moving toward establishing the foundation of human rights and eliminating discrimination in education, was quite short-lived.

The Bahá'í students whose successful passing of the entrance examination was announced in the first phase refused to select their fields of study and attend university because compliance with [the false information on their religious affiliation] in their test result forms would be tantamount to recanting their Faith. Instead, following the procedure practiced in the Bahá'í community, they chose to send letters of protest appealing to relevant authorities. Having received these letters, [authorities from the] Education Measurement and Evaluation Organization (EMEO) telephoned a handful of the students informing them that their appeals had been considered, and the reference to religion had been removed from their test result forms. The authorities asked them to inform other Bahá'í students of the action taken, summoning them to the office of the EMEO in order that their test result forms be corrected and their fields of study chosen. Another glimmer of hope was thus kindled in the hearts of the Bahá'í youth, who immediately proceeded to meet with the authorities in order to choose their fields of study. Again, with great regret, it was discovered that in the announcement to declare successful candidates, only a small handful of Bahá'í applicants had been accepted in the field of English language, an action which seemed to have been taken as a deliberate ploy to appease the international community, whereas ample and indisputable documentation exists that reveals that most of the Bahá'í applicants, who had been recognized to have successfully passed the National Entrance Examination, should have been accepted to enter universities in Iran.

Questions continue to preoccupy the minds of the members of the Bahá'í community in Iran and throughout the world as well as free thinkers and advocates of human rights: Does such unfair decision-making, such resorting to strategies whose direction is obvious and whose aim is to create prejudice and to violate the indisputable rights of a community, conform to standards of justice and equity? Should those who seek progress be barred from acquiring knowledge and deprived of actualizing their God-given potentialities because of their religious belief?

By now, a quarter of a century has elapsed in the reign of the Islamic government. To every act of injustice, Bahá'ís have responded with magnanimity. Faced with widespread and intense persecutions and multi-faceted iniquities, the Bahá'ís have never deviated, even by a hair's breadth, from the straight divine path, and they continue to hold fast onto the cord of patience and tolerance as dictated by their Faith and belief.

It is now hoped that [that respected authority], based on the Constitution, will take immediate action to ensure the emancipation of the Iranian Bahá'í community, reinstating their human rights and restoring the privileges of which they have been deprived.

Respectfully,
The Iranian Bahá'í community

BIHE STUDENT PROFILE #1:

Dreams of Going to University

GROWING UP IN Tehran, *Hamid* knew that — like almost everywhere else in the world — the key to a good job is a university diploma. But because he is a Bahá'í, he knew he had little chance of getting into college.

“It made all of us Bahá'í youth very sad about the future,” said Hamid, which is not his real name. “In Iran, if you don't have a university degree, it is very difficult to get a job.”

Now 32 years old and attending graduate school outside of Iran, Hamid had already been denied schooling once for being a Bahá'í. That was in 1984, when, as an 11-year-old in middle school, he was expelled along with most other Bahá'í children in Iran.

“For several months, I had to study at home,” he said. “My family helped me, but it was really tough for an 11-year-old child to study alone.”

An international outcry soon forced the government to re-enroll primary and secondary school children. But the government has continued to prevent Iranian Bahá'í youth from attending university.

“When I was in high school, I saw the other students studying and preparing to take the university entrance examination,” he said. “But I knew I had no hope of getting in.”

He tried submitting the forms to take the exams anyway. But in Iran, those forms require that prospective students put a mark to denote their religion. And there are only four possible religions to choose from: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism.

“Since I didn't belong to any of those denominations, I didn't mark anything,” said Hamid, noting that there was, of course, no place for the Bahá'í Faith. “I was told I could not be given an entrance card to the exam.”

That was in 1992. He tried other years, also, to get into university. But to no avail.

Eventually, he enrolled at the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), which at the time was little more than a correspondence school course for Bahá'ís, run by Bahá'ís. [See page 19]

“In the BIHE, you have to study by yourself. It is kind of like studying in prison alone. You have no friends, no teachers, nobody to take your questions.”

Many nights I dreamed I was allowed to get into the university, but in the morning I woke up and it was only a dream.

Because he also had to work to help support himself, it took six years to finish his studies.

“Many nights I dreamed I was allowed to get into the university, but in the morning I woke up and it was only a dream,” he said.

Eventually, in 2003, Hamid graduated from the BIHE with a degree in engineering. By that time, the Institute had achieved considerable distinction, and Hamid left Iran to enter graduate school in another country.

He hopes, however, to go back to Iran after he has completed his graduate studies. “Iran is my country. And I wish for the day that the government of Iran will understand that Bahá'ís want nothing but the progress and prosperity of Iran. And I want to go back and help the progress of my country.”

summoned to the Intelligence agency. He was ordered to identify himself and bring, for submission to the authorities, all of his booklets and textbooks.

On 19 July 2002, as the Institute was holding qualifying examinations across the country, Iranian Revolutionary Guards entered three sites in the city of Shiraz, where they videotaped the proceedings, interviewed several students, and confiscated 25 examination papers. In Mashhad, on the same day, the Guards entered all five of the district examinations and confiscated all of the examination papers, along with Bahá'í books.

“The goal of the government of Iran is to discontinue the [Bahá'í] University and silence this educational and spiritual movement,” said one Bahá'í who was closely involved in the University's operation and did not wish to be named after the 1998 raids. “They claim that a Bahá'í has no right to develop and must not have higher education, so that the community may become degraded.”

Creative, non-violent response

The establishment of the BIHE stands as a remarkably creative — and entirely non-violent — response to the on-going effort of the Iranian government to deprive Iranian Bahá'í youth of access to higher education.

Until the government raids at the end of September 1998, the Institute offered Bachelor's degrees in ten subject areas: applied chemistry, biology, dental science, pharmacological science, civil engineering, computer science, psychology, law, literature and accounting. And within these subject areas, which were administered by five university “departments,” the Institute was able to offer more than 200 distinct courses each term. In the beginning, courses were based on correspondence lessons developed by Indiana University, which was one of the first institutions in the West to recognize the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education. Later on, course offerings were developed internally.

The teaching was done principally via correspondence, or, for specialized scientific and technical courses and in other special cases, in small-group classes that were usually held in private homes.

“At the beginning, the students did not even know the names of their professors,” said one BIHE professor shortly after the 1998 raids. “Even after three or four years, the students did not know the names of their professors. They had never seen them. Because it was very dangerous. If somebody knows the name of them, maybe they would tell their friends. So it was all correspondence at the beginning of this plan.”

Over time, however, the Institute was able to establish a few laboratories, operated in privately owned commercial buildings in and around Tehran, for computer science, physics, dental science, pharmacology, applied chemistry and language study. The operations of these laboratories were kept prudently quiet, with students cautioned not to come and go in large groups that might give the authorities a reason to object.

An all-volunteer, unpaid faculty

At its peak, the Institute had more than 150 faculty members. Approximately 25 or 30 were professors who were fired from government-run universities after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Other faculty members included doctors, dentists, lawyers and engineers who gave of their time to teach students. The majority were educated in Iran, but a good number have degrees from universities in the West including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Columbia University, the University of California at Berkeley and the Sorbonne. None of the Bahá'í faculty members were paid for their time; all gave it freely as a form of community service.

“These youth are very precious people,” said a faculty member, explaining why they were willing to take such risks, without monetary remuneration, to establish the Institute. “We all care about

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BIHE STUDENT PROFILE #2:

Working Outside the Box

WHEN CONFRONTED BY four boxes — one for each of the major religions in Iran, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism — on university entrance forms, *Parviz* took a distinctively creative route.

“I just drew another box, added the word ‘Bahá’í,’ and checked it,” said *Parviz*, which is not his real name.

The tactic failed to impress government

When confronted by four boxes — one for each of the major religions in Iran, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism — on university entrance forms, Parviz took a distinctively creative route. “I just drew another box, added the word ‘Bahá’í,’ and checked it,” said Parviz.

authorities, who had since the early 1980s blocked Bahá’í youth from higher education.

“They wrote back saying that the application was incomplete,” said *Parviz*, who is now out of Iran and studying in another country. “So I went to the testing office in the Ministry of Education, along with another Bahá’í friend.

“And I asked ‘What is wrong with my application.’ And the guy sitting there just looked up and said, ‘I think you know what is the problem.’ And we tried to talk about it with him. But

finally he said ‘Either leave or I will call security.’”

His rejection was, of course, entirely expected. Thousands of Bahá’í young people have been denied access to higher education in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

“I wasn’t shocked to be rejected” said *Parviz*. “But it was still a disappointment because each time you apply, you hope something might change.”

Parviz eventually managed to get a college education by enrolling at the Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), a Bahá’í-run institution founded in 1987 to provide university-level education for Bahá’í youth on a correspondence-school basis. [See page 19]

“I knew all about the BIHE. It has its own exam, and I took that pretty much the same time as the national exam. And I got accepted and started. That was in 1990.”

Four-and-a-half years later, he graduated with a degree in civil engineering.

Parviz eventually found some work as a civil engineer, even though he could not obtain a license as a Bahá’í and a graduate of the BIHE.

“You don’t have to have a license in Iran. You do all the work and then have someone with an engineering license sign it for you for a fee. It is quite a common practice.”

Eventually, *Parviz* realized that to advance, and to pursue his goal of teaching, he needed a graduate degree. “I couldn’t go to graduate school in Iran, of course, so I left the country so that I could attend school outside,” said *Parviz*. At the time of this writing, he was pursuing a PhD at a noted Western university.

BIHE STUDENT PROFILE #3:

“We are still alive”

IN ORDER TO stay in high school, *Miriam* had to sign a statement vowing that she would not tell anyone in her school that she was a Bahá'í.

“By law we could attend high school, but in many cities, including in Tehran, Isfahan, Yazd and the others that are more influenced by the Muslim clerics, many Bahá'í students had problems nevertheless,” said Miriam, which is not her real name.

“In my case, after they found out I was a Bahá'í, the only condition they would accept me in high school was to sign a form, that no one in the school, including students and teachers, would find out that I was a Bahá'í.

“If anyone found out about my religion, then I would be expelled,” she said.

When it came time to apply for college, however, Mariam knew there was little or no chance for her to attend, even if she was willing to keep her beliefs to herself.

Entry forms for university in Iran in 1989 required a declaration of religion, and the Bahá'í Faith was not one of the four options. And since religious principle forbids Bahá'ís from lying if asked about their beliefs, no Bahá'í youth were being allowed into universities — a situation that prevails today.

Like other Bahá'í youth, her only option was to attend the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), a Bahá'í-run institution founded in 1987 to provide university-level education for Bahá'í youth on a correspondence-school basis. [See page 19]

Miriam was not happy about this. “I wanted to go to medical school, and it was clear that I couldn't do it through correspondence schools that had just been formed the previous year,” she

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said. “There would be no chance of being able to work at a hospital and get the experience I would need as a medical student.”

The BIHE was, nevertheless, her only option for obtaining higher education. And instead of studying medicine, she chose psychology.

“At the beginning, I was not invested in it. I was dragging my feet. But we had no other choice. So then I started doing it and disciplining myself.”

Eventually, Miriam was able to leave Iran. Her BIHE was recognized by a major North American university, where she entered a master's program in a field related to psychology.

“At the time, everyone told me that if I wanted to become a doctor, it was still not too late. They said, ‘You are 25 years old, why don't you start?’ But mentally, I didn't want to do medicine anymore. My BIHE degree in psychology just meant so much to me.

“It was my way of saying to the Iranian government that ‘I am a Bahá'í and I am proud and I don't care if you want to try to destroy us. We are still alive.’ And I needed to do something with my degree. I wanted to prove that we hadn't done this for nothing.”

them. They have been through tests and trials and they had no hope. They have been deprived of many things so if there was any chance for us to get something better for them, we did it.”

Each of the five departments drew not only on these volunteer professors for their academic expertise but also on a small and anonymous group of Bahá’í academics in North America, Europe and Australia who sent in the latest textbooks and research papers, occasionally made visits to Iran as guest lecturers, and otherwise provided instructional and technical support.

High academic standards

Entrance examinations for the BIHE were required, and they established high standards. Of the roughly 1,500 students who applied for admission in its first year of operation, 250 were accepted for the first semester of study. By 1996, a total of 600 students had enrolled in the Bahá’í Institute of Higher Education. By 1998, approximately 900 students were enrolled.

Among the indications of the Institute’s surprisingly high academic standards and instructional level was the success that a number of Institute graduates had in gaining admission to graduate schools outside Iran, including major universities in the United States and Canada. It should be added that some Institute graduates and students outside Iran have also had a difficult time getting their credits recognized — a fact of life for Institute graduates that stems directly from the Iranian government’s policy of blocking their access to education and its failure to recognize the Institute officially.

Complex administration

As noted, the Institute functioned basically like a correspondence school. And even its early years were marked by a certain level of harassment. At

first, students and faculty sent homework assignments and lessons back and forth via the state-run postal system. But the packages often did not arrive and were assumed to have been intercepted as part of the government’s attempt to interfere with Bahá’í education. Later the Institute resorted to its own delivery service, making extensive use of young people on motorbikes.

Since professors could not deliver lectures openly, they prepared their own written notes and compiled text books for distribution to the students. Some of these texts were based on the latest Western research. One student in civil engineering, for example, was studying the construction of earthquake-proof earthen silos — and the Institute’s overseas contacts were able to get for him some of the latest research on this topic from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The entire operation relied heavily on the use of extensive photocopying, and one of the biggest blows in the 1998 raids was the confiscation of several large photocopying units.

The Institute system also featured a network of special depository libraries around the country. Numbering more than 45, these libraries existed in the private homes of Bahá’ís and enabled students in each district to obtain access to the necessary textbooks for the courses. Some of these libraries were also seized in the 1998 raids.

Before the raids, as Institute officials began to feel increasing confidence about their operation, they started to organize many group classes along with independent study in private homes. The Institute also began to publish sophisticated course catalogues, listing not only course offerings but the qualifications of the faculty members. Through the international network of Bahá’í communities worldwide, the Institute also began to establish the means by which its graduates might become fully recognized by other institutions of higher education outside Iran.

Iran's Obligations under International Law

THE IDEA THAT education is a fundamental human right was first specified in 1948, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The Declaration states, in Article 26:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

The Declaration also establishes the right to freedom of religion, and it declares that:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Iran was among the 48 member states of the United Nations in 1948 that unanimously adopted the Declaration. Iran also ratified two "covenants" on human rights, which essentially translate the rights spelled out in the Declaration into specific treaties, creating what is known as an "International Bill of Rights."

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ratified by Iran on 3 January 1976, likewise restates each state's obligation to uphold the right to education. In Article 13, the Covenant also specifically states that this right applies to access to higher education:

Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education;

Further, the International Covenant on Civil

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and Political Rights, ratified by Iran on 23 March 1976, re-states the right to freedom of religion, codifying it as a firm obligation to be upheld by state parties to the Covenant. The Covenant states in Article 18:

Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

Although these documents were signed before the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, they remain in effect. Not only has Iran participated regularly in international reporting processes designed to uphold and reinforce these Covenants, it is a given that UN conventions remain binding on successive governments.

Yet, despite these and other obligations under international law, the government of Iran has persistently pursued its campaign of persecution against Iran's Bahá'í community.

Fortunately, the international community has responded sympathetically to the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran, expressing concern for the

The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has passed more than 20 resolutions expressing concern about reports of human rights violations in Iran, and each has made specific mention of the situation of the Bahá'í community there.

Bahá'ís and condemnation of the Iranian government. The Bahá'í community believes that this outpouring has been a strong restraining force against the government, preventing deprivations on a much greater scale.

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Following the lead of the Commission on Human Rights, the United Nations General Assembly itself has since 1985 approved some 17 resolutions that have specifically mentioned the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran and expressed concern over human rights violations there.

Virtually all of these resolutions have called on Iran to stop violating the rights of Bahá'ís and to abide by the various international covenants on human rights that the government has freely signed. UN resolutions have also called explicitly for the “emancipation” of the Bahá'ís of Iran.

Among the most salient features of the United Nations' attention to the Bahá'í case has been the continuing investigations conducted by a succession of highly regarded human rights specialists. Each was appointed by the UN Commission on Human Rights and given the mandate to probe into the human rights situation in Iran. And each has reported extensively on the real and serious nature of the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran, lending unimpeachable credibility to the Bahá'í case.

In their various reports to the Commission on Human Rights, these “Special Representatives” have expressed concern over the Iranian government's efforts to deny Bahá'ís access to higher education.

In 2001, for example, Special Representative Maurice Copithorne noted that “the Bahá'í community continues to experience discrimination in the areas of, inter alia, education, employment, travel, housing and the enjoyment of cultural activities. Bahá'ís are still, in effect, prevented from participating in religious gatherings or educational activities.” He added that Bahá'ís also continue “to be denied access to higher education in legally recognized public institutions.”

More recently, in 2003, the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, Professor Abdelfattah Amor, a noted Tunisian legal expert, took note of the continuing confiscations, imprisonments, and efforts to block Bahá'í youth from receiving higher education, and concluded:

While noting some promised improvements in treatment of the Bahá'í minority, the Special Rapporteur is of the view that the measures taken by the Iranian authorities to end the persecution of Bahá'ís, including by non-State entities, and to guarantee them the same rights as any other Iranian citizen are still inadequate. He again reminds the Iranian authorities of the need to ensure respect for the relevant provisions of international law, including article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. In addition, as a religious minority, Bahá'ís are entitled to the respect due to all other religious minorities.