Searching for Baha'i Identity

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Alexandra Leavy

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The Islamic Revolution of 1979 introduced a new, religious framework for the Iranian nation-state. While it has maintained a majority Shiite Muslim population since the 16th century, Iran had never institutionalized religion to such a large extent. This post-1979 development begs the question of how religious minorities, particularly the Bahá'ís, have related to this new nationalist identity. Bahá'ísm itself originated in Iran, yet its adherents have been persecuted by all modern Iranian regimes, even more so than other religious minorities. The simple explanation for this reality would be that they do not belong to the ahl al-dhimma,[1] or protected populations of the Islamic world, due to significant ideological disparities between Islam and the Bahá'í faith. But further examination of Iranian national identity suggests that there has never been a time in Iran's modern history in which the nation developed an identity completely devoid of Islam and that the Bahá'ís were at times a perceived threat to the Iranian nation-state. It is therefore unsurprising that the Bahá'ís have continuously faced oppression in their country of origin and have been unable to fully identify with Iranian nationality.

Nationalism is a relatively modern concept of political organization that Benedict Anderson defines as an "imagined political community [that is] both limited and sovereign,"[2] Scholars often debate the various factors that constitute one's national identity, but Ernest Renan suggests that the most important criterion in defining nationhood is the desire for a nation to be together.[3] This is particularly true for the Iranian nation, which has persistently differentiated itself from other Muslims because of its Shiite heritage. In 1501, Twelver Shi'ism became the official state religion of Iran under the Safavid Dynasty, and Iran's subsequently unique religious identity became evident in its national practices.[4]

The emergence of the Bahá'í faith thus represented a distinct departure from the traditional religious heritage of most Iranians. The religion's roots lie

in Babism, which emerged in 1844. Its leader, Sayyed Ali Mohammed, was a Shi'i Muslim who claimed to be a new prophet and attacked the Islamic clergy.[5] Therefore, Babism, and later the Bahá'í faith, were deemed threats to Islamic civilization. The teachings of Sayyed Ali Mohammed, or the "Bab", were said to supersede those of the Quran. Whereas Muslims view Muhammad as the final prophet, Babism purported that humankind will mature and more prophets will come.[6] The Bab also permitted a number of practices that were forbidden in Islam, such as contact between the sexes and usury.[7] The most controversial development, however, was the Bab's attempt to revive pre-Islamic cultural features such as the solar calendar and the Zoroastrian theory of elements.[8] The Bab himself was executed, but many of his followers joined the Bahá'í faith, which was established by one of the Bab's disciples. Babism had almost completely disappeared before the Bahá'ís revived its ideas and reformulated them into a more universal, pacifist religion that discouraged participation in politics.[9] Early Babis likely suspected that a more passive religion would be less prone to persecution.

From its inception, Bahá'ísm clashed with the Muslim character of Iran, both practically and ideologically. Intolerance persisted throughout Iranian history. Not even the revolutionary movement of the early 20th century would succeed in altering the negative disposition of Iranians toward the Bahá'ís and other religious minorities. While the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 attempted to usher in Western ideals of tolerance and religious freedom, Islam remained the official religion of Iran, underscoring its importance to the Iranian people. The secular revolutionaries of early 20th century Iran were largely anti-religion in principle but still used Islamic terms in their rhetoric and allied with the ulama The mosque continued to serve as the primary source of information for Iran's middle and lower classes, and thus, one had to go through the Muslim clergy in order to connect to the masses.[10] The modernizers tried to show that the goals of reform and the objectives of Islam were not mutually exclusive. More specifically, they emphasized the importance of distinguishing themselves from the West, rejected the imperialist encroachment of Western powers, and attempted to revive the glories of earlier Islamic culture.[11] Such a suspect alliance between the revolutionaries and the ulama demonstrates the strength of Islam in Iranians' self-identity. The revolutionaries understood the religiosity of the masses and concluded that they must adjust their writings accordingly.

These rhetorical accommodations are evident in the works of Iranian intellectuals such as Sayyed Jamal ed Din Afghani (1839-1897) and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani.[12] These writers and their co-revolutionaries ultimately wanted to overthrow the Shah but needed the cooperation of the clergy and the masses to succeed. While a secular revolution might have occurred at the elite level, however, the majority of Iranians remained a religiously oriented people.

The possibility remained open that the revolutionaries would initially use religious rhetoric to engage the public but later persuade them to adopt secular principles. This seemed to be the case when Reza Shah Pahlavi came to

power in 1926. A military officer with strong authoritarian tendencies, he also sought to bring secular reform to Iran. He encountered initial successes in the legal and judicial fields when in 1928 the Majlis, Iran's legislative body, adopted a new civil code. In addition, Reza Shah successfully created a state hierarchy of judges, effectively reducing the judicial power of the ulama to religious matters only.[13] The Shah also tried to directly impose Westernization on the Iranian people, passing a law in 1928 that required all men to dress in European fashion and in 1936 banning the wearing of the veil.[14]

But according to Nikkie Keddie, these top-down changes did not occur. "Iranian Muslims of the traditional and traditionally oriented classes — especially the bazaaris, the villagers, and recent migrants from village to town — tend to identify Islam with the ‘way things have always been,' or tradition." As a result, veiling, Islamic family law and custom, and other family practices remained steadfast, regardless of governmental efforts to stifle Islamic culture. Family law and other practices found in everyday life derive from the Quran and are consequently difficult to change. Indeed, those exposed to Western education began to conform to Western practices. For example, polygamy, permitted by Quranic law, remained legal in Iran, but many in the upper classes abandoned the practice. Other cultural practices among the rural and urban classes also remained largely Islamic in nature. Most continued to make regular pilgrimages to the shrines of imams in large cities or to those of their descendants in the countryside. Also, ceremonies were held for the major religious holidays, which usually commemorate he deaths of imams.[15] These examples provide further evidence that Iranians predominantly viewed themselves as Muslims; religious heritage outweighed any manifestly national identity. They also shed light on the important distinction between the elite and the masses. The existence of top-down measures to instigate cultural change does not in any way indicate that they are, in fact, successful. The case of Iran proves that strength of popular identity can indeed trump government policy.

Arguably the greatest of all the ambiguities within Iran's secular revolution was the national education system. In 19th century Iran, there was no formal system of education; it was the exclusive responsibility of the clergy, who taught Shiite catechism, Arabic, and the Qur'an. However, in 1910, the new constitutional regime established the Ministry of Education, Waqf, and Fine Arts — Iran's first attempt to create a unified, national administration for education. The Ministry mandated elementary education, publication of national textbooks, and professional training for teachers, which were all innovations of the West. Even more, the Ministry was required to send a certain number of students to Europe each year to study and even founded libraries, museums, and historical and scientific institutions with the intent to bring Western ideas to the Iranian masses.[16] Despite these measures, the influence of the Muslim clergy was still evident throughout the education system. Islam was still taught in schools, and no non-Muslim student could request to receive instruction in their own religion at state schools. Thus, Jews, Christian, Bahá'ís and all other religious minorities were subjected to Islamic

education if they attended state schools. In addition, all books considered harmful to the religion were banned. The government attempted to put state textbooks in maktabs, or mosque schools, but this measure failed due to clerical authority.[17] Thus, while the constitutional regime attempted to secularize Iran by incorporating Western ideas into state education, they instead created a dualistic curriculum, teaching secular concepts but at the same time keeping, and therefore supporting, its Islamic orientation.

The crystallization of Muslim identity in the Iranian national framework during the 20th century was complemented by extensive persecution of the Bahá'ís. Iranian literature, both religious and nationalist, identifies Bahá'ísm as foreign element of society — one that is distinctly not part of the Iranian community. Baha'ullah (1817-1892), the founder of the Bahá'í faith, said, "Pride is not for he who loves his country, but for he who loves the [whole] world."[18] This strong emphasis on globalism is often used in Iranian literature to accuse the Bahá'ís of being disloyal to Iran and unpatriotic. They are also accused of being spies and agents of foreign powers and enemies of Islam.[19] In addition, prominent Iranian academics and officials contributed to the institutionalization of anti-Bahá'í sentiment. Firaydun Adamiyat, a well-known Iranian historian, wrote of Bahá'í entanglement with foreign powers:

If the Babi and the Bahá'í religions had not acquired a political coloration, and if the hands of the foreigners had not watered its roots, they would certainly have been buried in the nooks and crannies of this vast land, like the thousands of other sects that spring up every now and then in this or that corner of Iran. Then, they would not have caused all this brouhaha.[20]

The public sphere was also home to anti-Bahá'í activity. The 1940s witnessed the establishment of many organizations dedicated exclusively to confronting the Bahá'ís and their public institutions.[21] The Anjuman-i Tablighat-i Islami was one of the most active anti-Bahá'í organizations of its time. It not only propagated the Islamic faith, but also dedicated itself to the public humiliation and degradation of Bahá'ís. In one 1945 report, the organization published letters written by Bahá'ís who had converted to Islam within the preceding year, the content of which expressed personal remorse and professed the inherent superiority of Islam. Another active organization, Jami'ayi Ta'limat Islami, concluded that religious education was the most effective way to achieve religious and social reform. They therefore actively sought to establish religious schools in areas known to have prominent Bahá'í educational institutions. The Bahá'ís were clearly sidelined on official, religious, and social levels, and this prejudice became most evident in the management of Bahá'í schools throughout the 20th century.

Baha'ullah considered education crucial to the development of human beings. He believed that every child has potential, and thus it was of "primary importance" that all children receive an education.[22] So in the late 19th century, the Bahá'ís decided to establish their own schools based on a more modern, Western approach. Bahá'í children were often forbidden from attending

schools in the maktab, but even those who were permitted were not satisfied with their limited curricula. Bahá'í leaders encouraged the teaching of sciences and the arts, and followers consequently sought alternative modes of instruction.[23] The first Bahá'í school opened in Tehran in 1897 and was recognized by the Iranian government two years later. Others soon opened where there were large Bahá'í communities.[24] Despite their initial successes, however, Bahá'í schools inevitably became the target of persecution, particularly from the Muslim clergy. Though private schools were allowed in Iran, local officials often denied the Bahá'ís proper certification under pressure from local Islamic leaders. The schools tried to make accommodations by not only abiding by governmental standards for curricula, but also by agreeing to eliminate instruction in the Bahá'í faith. Such measures did not prove successful though, as the attacks on Bahá'í schools continued. In 1921, a religiously motivated mob burned down a school in the town of Sangsar, spurning the Bahá'ís' futile attempt to protect themselves with a ring of barricades around the building. [25] Ironically, the Bahá'í schools were often considered some of the best in the country, and many prominent Muslims sent their children there. Unfortunately, this was not enough to stop the on-going persecution.[26]

Discrimination against the Bahá'í schools strengthened during the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi, who instituted a standard system of education throughout the country and subsequently began to encroach upon the autonomy of private and foreign schools. In 1928, he forced all private schools to adhere to the educational standards set forth by the Ministry of Education. This measure mandated that all students, regardless of their religious background, receive an Islamic education of some kind. Soon after, he directed his attention exclusively towards the Bahá'í schools. On December 7, 1934 following the holy day commemorating the death of the Bab, Tarbiyat School for Boys in Tehran received notice from the government that it was no longer permitted to operate. Within the next year the government proceeded to close every Bahá'í school in the country.[27] In 1940, Reza Shah converted all private schools into public ones, including those operated by foreign missionaries, and all curricula, textbooks, and examinations were placed under the control of the Ministry of Education.[28] The gradual systemization of education in Iran effectively eliminated any prospects for diversity within the nation's schools. A brief period of openness within this field was quickly replaced with a singular, Islamic structure for all Iranians; the Bahá'ís and other religious minorities were barred from conducting their own religious instruction. By mandating that the Bahá'ís receive instruction in Islam and occasionally barring them from receiving an education at all, the government isolated them rather than included them in the national discourse.

Though the Bahá'ís faced a tremendous amount of suffering throughout Pahlavi rule, they had not yet experienced arguably the most oppressive period of their short history. The 1979 Islamic Revolution implemented a plan for total Islamicization, which had a two prong effect. It cemented the ties between government and religion and further marginalized the Bahá'ís and other

religious minorities who obstructed the Islamic purification process.

It is this revolutionary fervor that invited the proliferation of state-sanctioned religious persecution. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who led the Islamic Revolution, capitalized upon existing anti-Bahá'í sentiment to advance his own political objectives and implement repressive policies. Many Bahá'ís were removed from their work positions, and much of the religious leadership was arrested and executed. On August 21, 1980, all nine members of the Bahá'í National Spiritual Assembly of Iran were arrested and soon disappeared. New members were elected, and on December 13, 1981, eight of them were arrested and executed two weeks later. By the end of 1984, the regime had killed 177 Bahá'ís in total.[29] Also, in 1979 Khomeini's Revolutionary Guards destroyed the House of the Bab, one of the holiest Bahá'í shrines.[30] Other actions against the Bahá'ís included kidnapping and imprisonment, mob attacks, forced recantation of the Bahá'í faith, barring Bahá'í professors from teaching, forbidding Bahá'í students from enrolling in universities, and dismissing Bahá'í students and teachers from schools.[31] While Iranian officials consistently denied that the government has sponsored such activity, persecution has continued through at least the late 1990s. Today, Bahá'í marriage, divorce, and inheritance rights remain unrecognized. Bahá'ís are still denied entrance to universities, and their property is also regularly confiscated. The Bahá'í population at its height represented over one percent of the total Iranian population at the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, however, Bahá'ís constitute well under one percent.[32]

Nevertheless, there are sizable Bahá'í communities in the diaspora due to the migration of Iranians. Some of them left to pursue economic opportunities or to become Bahá'í teachers in other places,but quite a few also left explicitly to escape persecution.

Prominent communities exist in Haifa, Beirut, Istanbul, and Egypt. Some of the largest diaspora populations are found in India, which has had a large Bahá'í community since the 19th Century, and in Russian Turkestan.[33] The will of the Iranian Bahá'ís to emigrate abroad and the overt support of Bahá'í leadership in this endeavor present convincing evidence that the Bahá'ís did not hold an unshakable attachment to their homeland. The universalizing nature of their faith encouraged them to expand beyond the borders of Iran, and the Bahá'ís prioritized the preservation of a strong religious community over nationalist commitments to their homeland. This speaks to the way in which the Bahá'ís conceive of their own identity — Bahá'ís first, Iranians second. From the time of the Constitutional Revolution, throughout the Pahlavi dynasty, and continuing through the post-revolutionary period in the late twentieth century, Muslim Iranians defined themselves first as being a part of a religious community. They did recognize the unique Persian heritage of the Iranian nation-state, but they always placed Islamic values before nationalist ones and often viewed them as one in the same. It was impossible, then, for Bahá'ís to adopt a complete Iranian identity because there was — and remains — a contradiction inherent in the concept of a distinctly national

Iranian heritage.

Notes

"ahl al-dhimma" refers to the protected peoples under the Islamic faith. This status initially applied only to People of the Book, or Jews and Christians, but was later extended to include people of several other traditions. Those accorded this status were given fewer rights than Muslims but more than other people living under Muslim rule.
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