



BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

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Member of the Bahá'í Community

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Hearing: "One Year Under Rouhani: Iran's Abysmal Human Rights Record"

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Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Cler Baheri. I was born in Tabriz, Iran and I am a Bahá'í. I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my story with you today.

The Bahá'í community of Iran has been the target of [systematic and severe state-sponsored persecution](#) since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. My family and my husband's family have experienced this persecution first-hand.

When the Revolution began, I was 12 years old. At the time, my father, Mehdi Baheri, had been serving on the Local Spiritual Assembly of Tabriz, the elected governing council of the Bahá'í community in that city. Because of my father's service to the Bahá'í community in Tabriz, our home was raided by Revolutionary Guards five times from 1979 to 1980. They took Bahá'í books, birthday cards we had received from our relatives abroad, and family pictures.

In 1980, my father and several other members of the Tabriz Assembly, along with two other local Bahá'ís, were arrested and imprisoned together. While he was in prison, my father was notified that, because he was a Bahá'í, his employment as an accountant with the Ministry of Health had been terminated, any salary owed to him was cancelled, and his retirement funds – which he had accumulated over the course of 24 years in the civil service – were repossessed.

My mother, my aunts, my elderly grandmother, my little brother, and I would visit my father once a week. My brother was nine and I was 15. My brother and I would take our report cards to show to my father in prison. He told us that he was happy that we were still doing well in school. Once, he wrote us a birthday note on a piece of his clothing that was sent home to be laundered. In the note, he said he needed us to understand that he was not in prison for any crime other than his belief in the Bahá'í Faith, and that he wanted us to fight for him by continuing to do well in school.

A few days before his execution, my father was taken, in the middle of the night, into a room with one interrogator and a tape recorder. The interrogator fell asleep, and my father was expected to continue to answer a list of questions that had been put in front him. This was his so-called “trial.”

After their interrogations, my father and the other imprisoned Bahá'ís were sentenced to death and held in solitary confinement for 24 hours. During this time, they were given the choice of “Islam or edam,” which means “Islam or death.” This meant that, if they recanted their faith and declared themselves to be Muslims, their lives would be spared. All of them refused to recant. Instead, they declared their belief in the Bahá'í Faith. For this, they were killed.

On July 29, 1981, at the age of 47, my father, Mehdi Baheri was executed. When my family was informed of my father's death, one of my relatives went to receive the body. The prison authorities forced him to pay for the bullets that had taken my father's life. Later that night, the executions were announced on the radio. The announcer stated that my father and the others were convicted of “corruption on earth” and “warring against God.”

I finished high school in Iran in 1983. Though I had one of the highest scores on the provincial exams, I, like many other Bahá'í students across Iran, was denied entrance to university solely because of my faith. The next year, I left Iran alone, traveling on the back of a truck through the desert into Pakistan. There, I was processed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and was resettled in Canada. I now live in Virginia with my husband, Naim Sobhani.

Naim is also a Bahá'í, and he is from Tehran. As a young man, he was arrested and detained three times in Iran – twice for playing jazz music in private concerts, and once for possessing educational materials for Bahá'í children. When he was arrested for having the Bahá'í children's materials, he was imprisoned for two months. He was held in solitary confinement for much of the time, in a small, dark room with no windows.

Naim was also denied admittance to university because he was a Bahá'í. Soon after, he left Iran alone, traveling with a tribal guide through the western mountains into Turkey. After being stranded in a mountain village for five days during border skirmishes, he crossed the border into Turkey. He was also processed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and was resettled in Maryland.

Naim's father, [Riaz Sobhani](#), is currently imprisoned in Iran for his efforts to educate Bahá'í youth. He had been a successful civil engineer before the Islamic Revolution, but, soon after the Revolution, he was terminated from his job for being a Bahá'í, and his salary, pension, and savings were seized.

In the years following the Revolution, Bahá'í students and professors were expelled from universities, and Bahá'í youth were denied the right to attend university. My father-in-law, Riaz, was deeply affected by this injustice against the Bahá'í youth, who were prevented from receiving an education. Although he himself could not obtain work because he was a Bahá'í, he wanted to use his education to help young Bahá'ís. So, in 1987, he, along with several other Bahá'ís – most of whom were academics and professionals who had also lost their jobs after the Revolution – came together to form the [Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education](#), known as BIHE.

BIHE is an informal network of classes designed to educate young Bahá'ís in a range of subjects, such as biology, engineering, psychology, architecture and law. Materials and funds are donated and the classes are usually held in homes. BIHE, which serves as the only viable avenue through which Iran's young Bahá'ís can obtain higher education, was [described](#) by the *New York Times* as “an elaborate act of communal self-preservation.”

Riaz has been instrumental in BIHE from the beginning, managing administrative work and hosting classes in his home. For over 20 years, he and the other dedicated faculty and staff of BIHE have been giving freely of themselves to ensure that, against all odds, the next generation of Bahá'ís has a chance to contribute to society.

In May of 2011, there was a [series of raids](#) on dozens of homes associated with BIHE. This was not the first time that BIHE had been raided; in fact, it had been subject to sweeping raids in 1998, as well as

attacks in 2001 and 2002. My father-in-law, Riaz, was arrested along with several other Bahá'ís in the May 2011 raid. Riaz was initially held in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison, and was in solitary confinement for at least one month. He is now 69 years old and has suffered from poor health in prison.

The following month, in June 2011, the government [declared that BIHE was "illegal,"](#) though any reasonable person would of course be moved to ask how BIHE – an unofficial entity through which the Bahá'í community undertakes efforts to educate its own youth, who are otherwise denied university education – could possibly be declared "illegal." Nevertheless, in July of 2011, Riaz and six other BIHE educators were [charged](#) with "conspiracy against the Islamic Republic of Iran" by "establishing the illegal Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education."

In September of that year, [Mr. Abdolfattah Soltani](#), the human rights lawyer who had taken on the case of my father-in-law and the other BIHE educators, was detained. He is one of many human rights lawyers who have been imprisoned in Iran for his advocacy on behalf of religious minorities and others who are oppressed by the government. In 2012, Mr. Soltani was sentenced to 13 years in prison and had his law license revoked. He has been awarded the Nuremberg Human Rights Award and the International Bar Association Human Rights Award.

In October 2011, after a brief show trial, my father-in-law and the six other educators were [convicted](#) of "membership in the deviant Bahaist sect, with the goal of taking action against the security of the country, in order to further the aims of the deviant sect and those of organizations outside the country." They were each sentenced to four or five year terms, with my father-in-law receiving four years.

After their sentencing, Riaz and the others were moved to Rajai Shahr Prison in Gohardasht, Iran, where the male prisoners were put in the same ward as the male members of the seven imprisoned Bahá'í leaders, known as the [Yaran](#). These seven individuals, who served as the former ad hoc leadership group of the Bahá'í community of Iran, have been in prison since 2008 and are serving 20-year terms, the longest sentences of any prisoner of conscience in Iran.

In the years since Riaz and the other educators were sentenced in October 2011, one BIHE educator has been released, while seven more BIHE educators have been imprisoned. Thus, there are now [12 individuals](#) who are in prison in Iran solely because of their efforts to educate Bahá'í youth. Their plight is part of what a number of human rights organizations have characterized as the Iranian government's [assault on academic freedom](#) and what Amnesty International has recently reported as the continuing [repression of students and academics in Iran](#).

What my husband's family is now living through because of my father-in-law's imprisonment is, unfortunately, nothing new. Their experience with persecution started long before Riaz's current imprisonment. In the early years after the Islamic Revolution, two of Riaz's cousins were executed for being Bahá'ís. When Naim's little brother, who was six years old at the time, passed away, they buried him in a small Bahá'í cemetery, and soon after, that Bahá'í cemetery was bulldozed and turned into an agricultural field. A few years later, Naim's grandmother and aunt were arrested and imprisoned for

being Bahá'ís; they were held in Evin prison for one year, in solitary confinement for part of the time, and they were repeatedly beaten and tortured.

In the last several years, Naim's younger sister Zhinoos and her husband Artin have both been imprisoned twice. Zhinoos, who was also denied admission to university, completed her studies in law with BIHE and was working with the Defenders of Human Rights Center, an organization founded by Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi that has since been shut down by the government. Zhinoos' work as a human rights defender was all the more dangerous for her because she is a Bahá'í.

And now, my father-in-law Riaz has been in prison for almost three years. Like my own father, Mehdi Baheri, he has done nothing wrong and has been imprisoned for no other reason than his faith. He and the rest of the Bahá'í community in Iran are persecuted in almost every realm of life solely because of their religious beliefs.

Unfortunately, it seems that the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran has actually worsened in the last year. While the Bahá'í community was at least somewhat hopeful that the situation would improve under Iran's new President Hassan Rouhani, the reality is that the pressure has increased since Rouhani was inaugurated on August 4, 2013.

Just a few weeks after President Rouhani took office in August, [Mr. Ataollah Rezvani](#), a Bahá'í in the city of Bandar Abbas, was killed in what, by all accounts, was a religiously-motivated murder. Then, in February of this year, three members of a Bahá'í family in the city of Birjand were [stabbed in their home by a masked intruder](#), though they, very fortunately, survived. There has been no progress in the investigation of either case.

In November of 2013, President Rouhani released a draft [Citizens' Rights Charter](#). As human rights organizations have noted, it is a [restrictive and problematic document](#) that raises [very serious concerns](#), one of which is its explicit exclusion of Bahá'ís from the rights and protections it enumerates. The Charter states that these rights and protections apply only to religious minorities officially recognized by the Iranian constitution, a group that excludes Bahá'ís.

In recent months, two Bahá'í cemeteries were attacked: [one in Sanandaj](#) was partly destroyed in December of 2013, and [one in Shiraz](#) is currently being excavated by Revolutionary Guards. I would like to thank the House of Representatives for passing, on May 28, H.R. 4028, which adds the "desecration of cemeteries" to religious freedom violations under the International Religious Freedom Act, and I hope that the Senate and the President will agree to this much-needed provision.

Meanwhile, authorities continue to [raid Bahá'í homes, shut down Bahá'í businesses, and arbitrarily arrest and detain Bahá'ís](#). No Bahá'ís were among the [prisoners of conscience released](#) ahead of Rouhani's visit to the UN in September 2013, and earlier this year, the [number of Bahá'ís in prison reached 136](#), the highest we have seen since the early 1990s.

Madam Chairman, the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran is grim. It is part of a broader human rights crisis in Iran, in which journalists and human rights lawyers are detained, executions are on the rise, students and women's rights activists are targeted, and ethnic and religious minorities, including Bahá'ís, Christians, Sufis and others, are brutally repressed.

I hope that hearings like this, and actions taken by the U.S., by other nations, and by international bodies around the world will shine a bright light on the human rights crisis in Iran, will hasten the release of my father-in-law, Riaz Sobhani, and all other prisoners of conscience in Iran, and will help bring the day when Bahá'ís and all citizens of Iran are granted their full human rights. Thank you.