

**An Exploratory Study Examining the Factors Associated with the  
Survival of Underground Education in an Oppressive Environment**

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## ABSTRACT

### An Exploratory Study Examining the Factors Associated with the Survival of Underground Education in an Oppressive Environment

Nayer Ghadirian

The Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in Iran is a university developed by the Baha'i community to provide access to post-secondary education for Iranian Baha'i students not allowed entry into mainstream universities within the country. The Baha'i Faith, a religion founded in Iran in 1844, numbers 300,000 adherents within that nation and has the second-largest number of religious followers, after Islam. Baha'is within the country have been continually discriminated against, with a notable increase in discrimination since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Operating since 1987, the university has repeatedly been attacked by the government and continues to face ongoing episodes of harassment. The current study explores what factors have allowed this educational endeavour to survive, and what challenges it continues to face, by gathering qualitative data from twelve former BIHE students, now residing in North America. Extracts from writings of the Baha'i Faith are used in conjunction with illustrative citations from interviews to investigate themes that contribute to the endurance of BIHE in Iran. The findings indicate that international support, community sacrifices, and individual resiliency represent several factors that have played a role in the continued life of the university.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Marilyn, Abdu'l-Missagh, and Sina for their encouragement when I needed it. I would also like to express my gratitude to my thesis advisor, Ailie Cleghorn, who has provided invaluable assistance while remaining patient over the years. And to my sweet Diana, whose giant intellect is matched only by her heart.

Lastly, I would like to thank those courageous individuals who volunteered to participate in this study. They are proof that no government or regime can suppress the intellectual pursuits of a people, should their collective will be strong enough.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward. The principal reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance. Today, the mass of the people are uninformed even as to ordinary affairs, how much less do they grasp the core of the important problems and complex needs of the time.<sup>1</sup>*

(Abdu'l-Baha)

#### Introduction and Problem Statement

Underground educational systems are a sad reality in many parts of the world where religious, racial, linguistic, and cultural discrimination prevent open access to instruction. Restricted from public arenas of learning, oppressed groups have had to develop unsanctioned alternative educational programs, often at the risk to the lives of both students and teachers. Some of these underground schools bestow unofficial degrees upon their graduates, as well as providing proof that learning has taken place. The remarkable fact of the survival of such institutions naturally leads to curiosity about how they are able to thrive in the face of open adversity. Numerous individual qualities, including bravery, sacrifice, and resilience, are often evinced by students and staff. Organizational qualities such as discipline and the pursuit of a high level of academic excellence may also be exemplified. Additionally, recognition of the spiritual nobility of education may serve to propel the continued success of these undertakings.

In Iran specifically, members of the Baha'i religion are the focus of political and educational oppression which restricts them from voting, working in government-run

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<sup>1</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1975) 109.

institutions, and attending college or university. Although the persecution of the Baha'is of Iran dates back to the early years of the religion's existence in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the 1979 Revolution and its subsequent return to orthodox Islamic law has led to new forms of human rights violations. As a result, in recent years, Baha'is, whose right to higher education has been violated have established their own institute of higher education for students who have received their high-school degrees and wish to pursue further education. The purpose of this study is to explore the motivating themes that have ensured the survival of this educational endeavour in the face of a hostile government which is determined to quietly strangle the Baha'i community by excluding the younger generation from access to higher education.

## Background and Rationale

The matter of Baha'i human rights violations has not been a recent discovery for me. Being raised in a Baha'i family with Iranian parentage on one side, I have grown up with the knowledge that my relatives in Iran are not allowed such basic rights as freedom to worship, to vote, or to work at public institutions. I have spoken with Baha'is arbitrarily thrown into prison soon after the Iranian Revolution, and a new generation of youth will soon be of the age where they find that access to public universities is barred for them. However, I have also learned that there is a message of hope in the midst of this oppression. An individual dear to me, formerly a professor at an Iranian university before the 1979 Revolution, now serves as a voluntary instructor at the underground Baha'i university. Receiving no remuneration for his valuable services, he, like many others,

provides a service to young Baha'is who would otherwise be left far behind their high-school classmates in the quest for knowledge.

In selecting this particular area for research, I am not simply fulfilling the educational requirements for the completion of a thesis. I have chosen a subject which appeals to my personal identity, to my desire for the deliverance of human justice, as well as to my scholarly interests. In this sense, I am fortunate compared with my colleagues in being able to investigate a phenomenon which is both close to my heart and to my mind.

The proposal for this study was initially approved in late 2005, but work commitments delayed the commencement of research for over two years. There is no doubt that if this project was necessary merely for academic accreditation, I would not be sitting here writing it. I am here writing because of a commitment to uncover the fuel that energizes the efforts of the oppressed Baha'i youth of Iran. I am also here to stand in solidarity with them.

In selecting such a delicate topic, there is also a fear that the research will be used for false ends by the very perpetrators who carry out these injustices in Iran. For this reason the names of all participants involved will be kept strictly anonymous. This is done in order to protect the identities of the subjects, and those who continue to serve and study at the underground Baha'i university in Iran.

## Chapter 2

### An Historical Exploration

#### The Baha'i Faith: An Overview

The Baha'i Faith was established in mid-nineteenth century Persia (now Iran) by a religious leader calling himself Baha'u'llah (which in Farsi means "Glory of God"). Declaring himself the successor to Mohamed, and the latest in the line of Prophets sent from God to educate humankind on the principles for a new era, Baha'u'llah delivered a message of global peace and unity. The Baha'i Faith now numbers over six million believers, with representation in every country in the world, counting itself proportionally amongst the most widespread of all major religions. Although originally consisting only of Persian followers, the Baha'i Faith has been embraced by citizens of nations throughout the world, and has drawn new believers from individuals of diverse religious backgrounds. Baha'i principles celebrate the diversity of human cultures, while recognizing the fundamental unity of all humankind. The major principles endorsed in its holy writings include such beliefs as the oneness of humanity, the elimination of prejudice of all kinds, equality of man and woman, harmony of science and religion, elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty, independent investigation of truth, the importance of community service, and universal access to education<sup>2</sup>. There is no clergy within the Baha'i Faith, as all members are considered able to read and interpret the holy writings without having a specifically-trained individual do so for them. Baha'i

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<sup>2</sup> "Basic Teachings of Baha'u'llah," The Baha'i Faith, 2008, Baha'i International Community, 18 Sep. 2008 <<http://info.bahai.org/bahaulah-basic-teachings.html>>.

administration is elected, and based on local and national bodies, as well as one international governing body.

### History of the Persecution of Iranian Baha'is

Dating back to the beginnings of the religion in the mid-nineteenth century, Iranian Baha'is have been persecuted and tortured by both religious and secular authorities. Religious hostility to the Baha'is has arisen for differing reasons, among them that the rising success of the new Baha'i Faith threatened the hegemonic powers carried by the Islamic clergy. Amongst the rebuttals issued by the Muslim clerics to Baha'u'llah's statement was the rejection of his claim that he was indeed the successor to Mohamed, which seemed to constitute a violation of Mohamed's claim that he was the Seal of the Prophets<sup>3</sup>. Interpreting this as Mohamed being the last prophet to be sent from God, the religious authorities immediately declared Baha'is heretics, ignoring the Baha'i interpretation that Mohamed "sealed" the previous prophetic era, but that a new era had begun with Baha'u'llah. Other principles that conflicted with traditional Islamic doctrine involved the equality of man and woman, as well as the balanced approach granting importance to science alongside religion.<sup>4</sup>

The secular government of Iran was led by a king-like head of state, known as a "shah", from the early periods of the Baha'i Faith until the overthrow of the monarch in 1979. That government permitted and even advocated the persecution of Baha'is during periods when it required the support of the Muslim clergy. Throughout the first 79 years

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<sup>3</sup> Muhammad, "The Clans," The Koran, 18 Sep. 2008 <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/k/koran/koran-idx?type=DIV0&byte=650389>>.

<sup>4</sup> The Bahai Question, Iran's Secret Blueprint for the Destruction of a Religious Community (New York: Baha'i International Community Publications, 1993), 12.

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, opposition came in waves, depending on the status of the current regime. It has included such repeals of basic human rights as the banning of Baha'i literature, non-recognition of Baha'i marriages, demotion of Baha'is in public service, and Baha'i school closings<sup>5</sup>.

At the end of the era of the Shah, the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 witnessed the beginning of new levels of human rights violations that would continuously escalate. The new constitution that was drawn up omitted any reference to Baha'is, despite their being the largest religious minority group, although smaller groups such as Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians were all included. This has resulted in Baha'is being the victims of assaults of all kinds, and not having any legal recourse within the Iranian judicial system, where they are referred to as "unprotected infidels"<sup>6</sup>. In 1980, an alarmed international Baha'i community heard of the targeted kidnapping and execution of all nine members of the Baha'i national assembly of Iran, as well as many members of their local counterparts. Others were brutally murdered through such means as being stoned or burned to death by blood-thirsty mobs incited to rage by local clergies now free from government restraints. The following year exceeded the previous one for numbers of Baha'is executed by the government, with eight of the nine members of the new national Baha'i governing body being put to death, all this despite a growing international outcry. The executions continued over the next several years, accompanied by a formal government decree stating that Baha'i national and local administrative bodies would no longer be allowed to operate within the country. The execution of 17-year old Mona

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>6</sup> "Iran's Campaign to Deny Higher Education to Baha'is," Closed Doors, 2005, Baha'i International Community, 20 Sep. 2008 <<http://denial.bahai.org/006.php>>.

Mahmudnizhad, found guilty of teaching Baha'i children's classes, represented a most vivid example of the courage exemplified by the Iranian Baha'is in the face of oppression. Along with nine other women, Ms. Mahmudnizhad was subjected to mental and physical torture, always with the offer that unconditional release would be available should she choose to recant her faith. As this alternative was rejected, all ten were hung. Alternate methods of torture meted out to Baha'is have included beatings, floggings, having the soles of their feet whipped, having their fingernails and teeth pulled out, food and water deprivation, mock executions, and being forced to witness the torture of family members and friends<sup>7</sup>.

The inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran also resulted in the termination of employment for all Baha'is employed as civil servants, along with the revocation of their pensions. This was followed shortly thereafter by the demand by the government that these former civil servants repay the government all salary they had acquired during their previous period of employment, an impossible task which thus resulted in the imprisonment of many. The stifling of the economic existence of Baha'i community members was further extended by the confiscation of trading licenses for Baha'i business associates along with the freezing of bank accounts. Properties and homes were seized by the government, with those able to maintain possession being the victims of arson and looting. Baha'i properties and holy sites were immediately appropriated, resulting not only in the loss of custodianship for such places of worship, but in some instances being forced to witness their demolition and conversion into public spaces such as parking lots.

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<sup>7</sup> The Bahai Question, Iran's Secret Blueprint for the Destruction of a Religious Community (New York: Baha'i International Community Publications, 1993), 19.

Baha'i cemeteries, as expected, have also been confiscated, forcing Baha'is to bury their dead in sites specially set aside for "infidels"<sup>8</sup>.

The current government of Iran has long reiterated that its persecution of Baha'is is justified for various reasons, each of which is inherently false. It claims that Baha'is are heretics and enemies of Islam, which can be disproven through a reading of Baha'i holy writings praising the station of Mohamed as Messenger of God. Another rationalization involves the conspiracy theories that Baha'is supported the previous Pahlavi monarchical reign, and that Baha'is are Zionist agents. In fact, Baha'is are explicitly forbidden to engage in partisan politics and must always show loyalty to their government, hence the disbanding of their administrative units in Iran. Baha'is cannot collaborate to support any governmental regime. The charge of Zionism exists primarily due to the Baha'i World Centre's existence in Haifa, Israel; however, this choice of location is due to Baha'i scriptures revealed almost one hundred years prior to the creation of the state of Israel, describing this region as the most holy of sites.

Although international diplomatic pressure has been exerted upon Iran to cease human rights abuses against Baha'is, much of the criticism resulted in denials and claims that exaggerated violations were being reported. The claims of the Iranian government were shown to be false in 1993, when a confidential document was exposed by a UN Special Representative to the Commission on Human Rights, revealing the means by which the Iranian government was attempting to strangle the Baha'i community. Drawn up by the Secretary of the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council, and approved by the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the blueprint, referred to as the Gulpaygani

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 23.

Memorandum, reveals how the government establishes a plan to shift tactics away from violence and torture, and towards a more subtle, yet menacing means of purging the country of the Baha'i Faith. The following points are reproduced as they appear in the document, in the section entitled "Summary of the Results of the Discussions and Recommendation":

A. General status of the Baha'is within the country's system

1. They will not be expelled from the country without reason.
2. They will not be arrested, imprisoned, or penalized without reason.
3. The government's dealings with them must be in such a way that their progress and development are blocked.

B. Educational and cultural status

1. They can be enrolled in schools provided they have not identified themselves as Baha'is.
2. Preferably, they should be enrolled in schools which have a strong and imposing religious ideology.
3. They must be expelled from universities, either in the admission process or during the course of their studies, once it becomes known that they are Baha'is.
4. Their political (espionage) activities must be dealt with according to appropriate Government laws and policies, and their religious and propaganda activities should be answered by giving them religious and cultural responses, as well as propaganda.
5. Propaganda institutions (such as the Islamic Propaganda Organizations) must establish an independent section to counter the propaganda and religious activities of the Baha'is.
6. A plan must be devised to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country.

C. Legal and social status

1. Permit them modest livelihood as is available to the general population.
2. To the extent that it does not encourage them to be Baha'is, it is permissible to provide them means for ordinary living in accordance with the general rights given to every Iranian citizen, such as ration booklets, passports, burial certificates, work permits, etc.

3. Deny them employment if they identify themselves as Baha'is.
4. Deny them any position of influence, such as in the educational sector, etc.<sup>9</sup>

The Gulpaygani memorandum unfortunately does not represent the only case of upper-echelon directives formally outlining plans to marginalize members of the Baha'i community. In 2006, a confidential memo sent by the director general of the Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, Asghar Zarei, to 81 universities in Iran, explicitly states that "...if the identity of Baha'i individuals becomes known at the time of enrolment or during the course of their studies, they must be expelled from the university."<sup>10</sup> This memo thus serves to refute what Iranian diplomatic officials have been stating, such as charge d'affaires of the Iranian Embassy in London, Hamid Reza Arefi's claim that "in Iran, no individual is excluded from higher education solely because of his/her ideology."<sup>11</sup>

#### Education of Baha'is in Iran

*Observe carefully how education and the arts of civilization bring honour, prosperity, independence and freedom to a government and its people<sup>12</sup>*

Not surprisingly, considering the importance placed on education within its holy writings, public primary and secondary schools organized and developed by Baha'is began to emerge throughout Iran during the latter stages of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early into the following century. These schools began to foster admiration at the community level, not only for the intellectual aptitude demonstrated by their students, but also the high

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 38-39.

<sup>10</sup> "Confidential Iran memo exposes policy to deny Baha'i students university education," One Country, 2008, Baha'i International Community, 25 Sep. 2008  
<[http://www.onecountry.org/e191/e19108as\\_Iran\\_Denial\\_document\\_story.html](http://www.onecountry.org/e191/e19108as_Iran_Denial_document_story.html)>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Abdu'l-Baha, The Secret of Divine Civilization, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1975) 111.

levels of moral rectitude evinced by their pupils. Traditional education in this time period involved rote memorization of the Qur'an, coupled with blind acceptance of the dogmatic religious theory lectured by clerics who had no training in sound pedagogy. The Baha'i attitude towards recognizing the importance of the arts and sciences, and the fostering of strong moral character, was seen as a breath of fresh air by many, in contrast with the outdated teaching practices of traditional schools. This growing respect within the community, along with the development of schools for girls, uncommon in Iran at that time, resulted in large numbers of students of non-Baha'i backgrounds being sent to these schools by their families<sup>13</sup>.

Unfortunately this rising growth in popularity did not shield the Baha'i schools from persecution from the religious clergy. In the late 1870s, two schools for boys and girls located in the northern province of Mazandaran, the first documented Baha'i schools opened in Iran, attracted the attention of nearby religious leaders. Many of the town's citizens had become Baha'is in recent years, and were sending their children to these schools. The school's founder, Mullah Ali, previously a Muslim religious cleric, was taken to Tehran and summarily executed in 1882<sup>14</sup>. Despite this incident and others of equal injustice that were to follow in the early years of Baha'i schools in Iran, these academies of learning proved resilient and continually re-emerged - much to the displeasure of the ruling religious elite. Moojan Momen, Baha'i historian and scholar, notes the significance of these emerging schools.

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<sup>13</sup> "Iran's Campaign to Deny Higher Education to Baha'is," Closed Doors, 2005, Baha'i International Community, 24 Sep. 2008 <<http://denial.bahai.org/006.php>>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

In many places, after fifty years of hiding and keeping a low profile following Babi (early Baha'i) persecution, the establishment of a Baha'i school was the first occasion that the Baha'i stepped into the public arena. The schools thus became the visible sign of the existence of a Baha'i community in each locality and therefore often bore the brunt of the ignorance and prejudices of the masses of Iranians, who had grown up fearing and hating the Babis for no particular reason other than that this was what they were taught by their religious leaders and elders.<sup>15</sup>

1934 witnessed the closing of most Baha'i schools by government decree. In an attempt to "Iranianize" the social institutions of the government, the reigning monarch indicated that schools could only be closed on government-permitted holidays, which as expected included Muslim holy days but not Baha'i ones. As Baha'is are not permitted to work or study during certain holy days throughout the year, the ultimate result involved the shutting down of Baha'i schools. Over the next 45 years Baha'is continued to attend state-run schools, with moral and religious instruction continuing on in the private homes of Baha'i families. Despite the oppressive atmosphere propagated by the government and media enforcing the stereotype that Baha'is were second-class citizens, they continued to succeed academically, reaching levels of prominence in all fields of higher education, including medicine, engineering, law, and business. Literacy rates for young Baha'i women were measured at 100%, as opposed to 25% for their non-Baha'i female counterparts<sup>16</sup>.

#### Recent Attacks Against Iranian Baha'i Public School Students

The plight of Baha'i students at the primary and secondary school levels continues to be a source of concern, as examples persist of cases throughout the country where religious membership has been used as an excuse for suspension and expulsion. In

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

the province of Esfahan, 10 students were expelled from schools in the fall of 2007 when they chose to write “Baha’i” in the space allotted for religion on school forms. When the parents and students returned to the school several days later to speak with the principal, they were met by thirty Islamic Revolutionary Guard called in to intimidate them, accompanied by local theology school students. The Baha’is, refusing to leave the benches that they sat upon, were carried out on the benches by Guards chanting anti-Baha’i rhetoric<sup>17</sup>.

In the city of Kerman, a Baha’i high school student was taken to her school’s authorities as a result of what was termed “teaching activities”. Apparently some of her classmates had begun asking her some questions regarding her faith, and her responses had been overheard by the teacher. The student was then asked to sign a document stating she would no longer engage in these “incendiary” teaching activities. Courageously rejecting the notion that she was proselytizing, she asserted that she was simply answering her classmates’ questions and refused to sign the paper. She was then told to choose between her religion and her education, which proved a simple enough decision to make, that being the former. The ensuing chaos resulting from her expulsion included the protesting by 800 of her fellow schoolmates, wryly noted by the student’s mother when speaking with the principal that now the entire school had heard about the Baha’i Faith. The student’s potential transfer to another school was reconsidered when the student’s mother noted that it would likely be another opportunity for more people to hear about her religion. Ultimately, she returned to her original school under the condition that she

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<sup>17</sup> Baha’i World Centre Office of Public Information. Letter to selected Baha’i National Spiritual Assemblies. 25 Feb. 2008.

not initiate any further discussions about the Baha'i Faith, or cause any kind of an uproar upon her return<sup>18</sup>.

Other examples have been documented involving Baha'i students in primary and secondary schools attempting to correct their teacher's inaccurate historical Baha'i references, or prejudiced social commentaries based on stereotypes and lies propagated in popular culture over many years. The results of these bold challenges have ranged from disapproving rebukes to outright expulsions, with recourse through any governmental department of education branch generally proving unproductive<sup>19</sup>.

#### Relevant Historical Comparisons

Although there have been countless examples of certain segments of a population being barred from access to public education, there is a paucity of scholarly research dedicated to examining alternative educational systems that have been designed as a response to this denial. A review of scholarly databases covering such topics as education, political science, sociology, and religion reveals that almost no research has been conducted on post-secondary institutions that have developed in circumstances similar to those that gave rise to BIHE. Fortunately, although critical academic research is scarce, there do exist short descriptive articles providing overviews on similar situations that have arisen throughout the globe. A review of these articles will help to situate the present state of affairs in Iran as part of a larger phenomenon involving resistance at the educational level.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

In 1989, following the revoking of Kosovo's special autonomous status within Yugoslavia, all academic institutions fell back under the direct control of the central government in Belgrade.<sup>20</sup> Previous legislation ensuring the survival of the Albanian language and culture in primary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions was dismissed shortly thereafter. Serbian was made the sole language of instruction at the University of Pristina, and only Serbian professors were allowed to teach. By late 1991, approximately 18,000 teachers, professors, and staff members were let go from their positions at schools and colleges throughout Kosovo due to their status as ethnic Albanians. The following year, supported by the global Albanian community, an educational system parallel to the newly-formed Serbian one was set up that included underground university classes; however, a lack of resources necessitated using garages, living rooms, and basements.<sup>21</sup> In a tactic later mirrored by the Iranian government's actions towards Bahai's, the Yugoslav government in 1996 met with ethnic Albanian representatives and agreed to share the University of Pristina campus with ethnic Albanians. It was later discovered that very few buildings were to be handed over, and that these had been vandalized and stripped of teaching-related equipment (chairs, books, and computers). Another characteristic identical to the Baha'i situation in Iran involves the lack of salaries for professors and teaching assistants, which resulted in many staff working two full-time jobs in order to survive

Following the NATO bombings of 1999 and intercession of peacekeepers, University of Pristina has returned to providing access to education in both Serbian and

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<sup>20</sup> "Rebuilding the University of Pristina" World Education News & Reviews, 2008, World Education Services, 9 Sep. 2008 <<http://www.wes.org/eWENR/99july/research.htm>>.

<sup>21</sup> A. Coulter, "Kosovo's struggle," The Times Educational Supplement 16 Oct. 1998: 7.

Albanian languages, albeit with mixed results<sup>22</sup>, with one official indicating that there was a lack of success in uniting the Serbian and Albanian students in one university. The future of the university remains unsettled at this time, with both sides continuing to negotiate for access to resources.

Although it is presumptuous to infer what factors led to the continued survival of the underground university in Kosovo throughout the 1990s when no formal research has been carried out, there is the sense that post-secondary education plays an integral part in maintaining Albanian culture. Fahmi Agami, a political activist living during this period in Kosovo, expressed his view that “it’s better like this than to accept the abolition of the university. It is too precious to forfeit”.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, personal ambition and employment concerns do not appear much involved in the decision students made to attend this university, since graduates of the parallel university (regardless of discipline) were unable to secure employment due to jobs being filled by Serbs brought in from areas outside of Kosovo.

Poland represents another example of a nation which has been shaken by oppressive regimes that have restricted access to post-secondary education. However, this nation is unique in that within a span of one hundred years, the same underground education network emerged during three separate time periods, each time proving its resiliency in the face of an intruding neighbour seeking to wield power. The name given for this institution was the Flying University, although it was at times also called the

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<sup>22</sup> Burton Bollag “A House Divided in Kosovo,” The Chronicle of Higher Education 7 Mar. 2003: A44-46.

<sup>23</sup> Dusko Doder, “Ethnic Albanians in Serbia’s Kosovo Hold Secret Classes to Hold a University,” Chronicle of Higher Education, 9 Dec. 1992: A35.

Floating University, due to its not having a fixed location for classes<sup>24</sup>. It was originally created during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Russian Empire's control of Warsaw and neighbouring areas restricted and at times barred the teaching of Polish language and history, Catholicism, as well as prohibiting any type of higher education for women. Covering such areas as philology and history, pedagogy, and the natural and social sciences, the Flying University charged a small fee that was mainly used to stock and upkeep a secret library. The courses were initially available to women in separate classes, but ultimately merged into co-ed classes. Although classes did take place in homes and shops, a significant amount of self-directed learning was required, placing great onus for individual success on the initiative of the student. Perhaps the most well-known graduate of the Flying University's first incarnation was the Nobel Prize-winning scientist, Marie Curie, who spent her evenings as an older teenager visiting the various homes that substituted for classrooms in Warsaw.<sup>25</sup>

Although the Flying University was formally recognized and permitted to "land" in 1905, its role was reprised during World War II when German rule forbade the Polish youth from attending university.<sup>26</sup> German racial theory held that Slavic people were intellectually inferior to their German neighbours, and thus did not require institutes of higher learning<sup>27</sup>. Using course materials distributed from secret printing houses, classes were held in private apartments not just within Warsaw, but throughout Poland, resulting in undergraduate, master's, and doctorate degrees being awarded in such fields as law,

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<sup>24</sup> "The Flying University: A History" 13 Sep. 2008

<<http://sg.geocities.com/theflyinguniversity/history.htm>>.

<sup>25</sup> Wojciech A. Wierzewski, "Maria's Mazowsze Roots," *The Pole Star*, 21 Jun. 2008: 16.

<sup>26</sup> "Poland – History & Background," 3 Sep. 2008

<<http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1209/Poland-HISTORY-BACKGROUND.htm>>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

mathematics, medicine, and various social sciences. Also underground, though not affiliated with these universities, was a seminary college funded by the Roman Catholic Church which was to graduate future pope, John Paul II. Although not of university age at the time of these events, Esther Brunstein's recollection of her life as a child in the Jewish ghetto of Lodz, Poland provides stark details about the inhumanity of everyday life.<sup>28</sup> The time spent in make-shift classrooms gave her moments in her days when she was able to forget the cruelties surrounding her.

*In most households, there was death and sickness and hunger and cold, and here we had a couple of hours with others and with an adult, a teacher, talking about things that were totally unconnected with what we were going through, trying to be normal children for a couple of hours... There was another world outside and that was important to know because someday we would all be part of a normal world. We had to believe that.*<sup>29</sup>

The third period of underground educational resistance in Poland's recent history occurred in the time following World War II, when Communist doctrine inspired curriculum developers to re-write history textbooks to negate previous Polish-Russian conflicts, resulting in the Flying University's re-emergence.

In addition to the previously described educational deprivations heaped upon Polish Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe during World War II, a number of Jews in Britain were held prisoner during this period and suffered a wide range of injustices, including being restricted from access to higher education.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the 1930s, assisted by encouraging immigration laws in England, a sizable population of Jews had fled the increasingly oppressive regime in Germany, only to find that when the war formally

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<sup>28</sup> Esther Brunstein, "The Quiet Resistance," Adults Learning Jun. 2003: 12-14.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Maxine Seller, We built our lives: Education and community among Jewish Refugees interned by Britain in World War II, (Westport: Greenwood, 2001) 187.

broke out, their new host country labelled them as enemy aliens and sent them off to internment camps, which for some would last the entirety of the war. Held prisoner within Britain, systematic post-secondary classes were set up by members of that imprisoned community that did not require any entrance requirements, simply a desire to enhance one's knowledge base. Assisted by visiting professionals, these courses involved various fields within the arts and sciences, which provided students of all ages not only with a distraction from their place of captivity, but also with access to education.

Even in places where higher education is formally available to members of marginalized groups, the de facto state can be one of intimidation and terrorization of these groups despite their supposed freedom. Afghanistan has witnessed significant changes in the years following the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, including the implementation of important policy changes with regards to access to education for women. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Zoepf describes the transformation from the Taliban period when schooling for youth was primarily religious education and restricted to male students only, to the current period where, despite a small but growing percentage of females in schools and universities, there is still the threat of reprisal that looms over those brave female learners who would challenge the norms<sup>31</sup>. Women at universities are bullied by their male counterparts and made to feel unwelcome, and are forced to walk together in groups throughout the campus in order to feel safe. Headscarves, although not officially mandatory, are again the de facto requirement, and it is not uncommon for female high schools to face atrocities such as being bombed or set on fire.

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<sup>31</sup> K. Zoepf, "Women Fight for Opportunity and Respect at Afghan Universities," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 27 Jan. 2006: A48.

Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan to the south and east, also has a history of institutes of higher education struggling with the concept of allowing women into the classroom as a result of the influence of the Taliban. Del Castillo describes the struggle for Afghan refugees to obtain post-secondary training in Pakistan, at the now-defunct Afghan University, just inside the Pakistan border in Peshawar<sup>32</sup>. Women, primarily Afghan refugees, were allowed access to the university, although the Taliban's presence within the university has consistently battled to shut down the female dormitories and has essentially forced them out. Del Castillo notes that a contributing factor behind the continued presence of women on campus involves the support these students receive from their families, fellow refugees in Peshawar. These families had often made the choice to leave Afghanistan in order to provide access to a better life for their daughters, and were thus more likely to support them throughout their university years.

The current situation in Israel involving the education of Palestinians, although not identical to the conditions in Iran, demonstrates how a majority group can maintain its hegemonic power through the aid of the educational system.<sup>33</sup> Mar'i's seminal text, *Arab Education in Israel*, reveals how the pedagogy of Israeli institutions enforces the inclusion of mainly Zionist content even in primarily Arab schools, and that comparatively little Arab cultural content is taught in primarily Jewish schools. As a review of this article points out, this results in the education system of Israel "functioning as an agency of social control."<sup>34</sup> Mar'i notes that attempts at integration of Arabs and Jews in the same school has typically met with failure, partly due to Jewish community

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<sup>32</sup> D. Del Castillo, "A University in Pakistan Struggles to Educate Refugees from Afghanistan" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 Oct. 2001, A42.

<sup>33</sup> Sami Khalil Mar'i, *Arab Education in Israel*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1978).

<sup>34</sup> E. Zureik, "Educational Discrimination," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Spring 1979: 117.

concerns that Arab-Jewish close relationships were developing, and were deemed inappropriate as they could lead to marriage. Although Palestinians are not explicitly barred from entering post-secondary institutions, Mar'i notes that although they make up 15% of the population of Israel, they represent only 3.5% of all university students.<sup>35</sup> Causes behind this phenomenon are judged to be various, including primary and secondary level schools that are not stocked with sufficient teaching tools and resources, a lack of qualified teaching staff in Arab schools, and teaching styles in Arab schools which encourage rote memorization and thus do not engender success at university entrance examinations which require analytical thinking. In addition, Arab university graduates find that channels for social mobility are impeded, and perhaps most discriminating of all, Arab students are not allowed access into certain fields associated with warfare development (electronics, nuclear physics) due to matters of national protection.

It is thus perhaps not so startling to learn that Palestinians living outside Israel, in the West Bank, have sizable numbers of their population attending university - in fact, proportionally more than in Israel. Similarly, attendance and matriculation levels are all greater for Palestinians living outside of Israel than within. Unsurprisingly, Mar'i notes that many young Palestinians in Israel share a sense of hopelessness about their future. It is concluded that this situation has arisen, not due to Arab traditionalism and familialism, but due to "objective conditions of discriminatory treatment against Arabs."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 119.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 3

### Literature Review

#### Previous BIHE-related Research

Despite these helpful historical treatments, it is believed that at this time there is only a single published scholarly article concerning the qualities that allow underground post-secondary institutions to survive, and remarkably this article pertains to the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in Iran<sup>37</sup>. Led by Friedrich Affolter, researchers collected data between mid 2004 to late 2005 through the interviewing of 180 participants, including current students, alumni, faculty, staff, and community volunteers. The primary focus of the article was to explore the motivational factors causing those connected with BIHE to choose to align themselves with such a potentially dangerous effort. Data collection methods included focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The majority of subjects were women, reflecting the fact that three-quarters of students at BIHE at that time were females. The results are broken down into student, faculty, and volunteer motivations, and describe general themes which are illustrated through anonymous quotes.

A major motivational theme for students involved a deep desire for learning and a lack of alternative options. Excerpts taken from student interviews indicate a widespread belief that access to education is a universal right that no governmental regime can take away. Another theme is the desire to remain academically, professionally, and socially

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<sup>37</sup> Friedrich Affolter, "Resisting Educational Exclusion: The Baha'i Institute of Higher Education in Iran" Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education 1(1) 2007: 65.

engaged, as students expressed their need to be surrounded by peers in addition to building a knowledge base that may prove useful in seeking employment at some future point. A third theme that emerged involves the choice to enrol in BIHE as a means to protest the government's attempt to restrict the level of education they can attain. One student courageously states that "it is my way of saying to the Iranian government that 'I am a Baha'i and I am proud and I don't care if you want to destroy us. We are still alive'." This final theme demonstrates how the services and sacrifices evinced by faculty, staff, and volunteers served to motivate students to achieve their utmost, considering the constraints set by the oppressive environment.

For faculty members teaching at BIHE, a major motivating factor involved the desire to remain active within their professional area, having had their own teaching careers cut off when their jobs were taken away following the Islamic Revolution. Examples are provided involving Baha'i academics who felt disillusioned and isolated following the events of 1979, only to have experienced rejuvenation and having a renewed sense of value upon being asked to contribute at BIHE. Another theme that arose involved the merits of community service, most especially during times of oppression. One individual remarks that having had friends give their lives for their faith, the sacrifice of giving one's time for teaching with no remuneration was so little in comparison. A final theme for faculty involved pride in witnessing the growth of BIHE and contributing to its development into a model of academic excellence.

Community volunteers involved with BIHE expressed sentiments similar to those of their faculty counterparts, suggesting that their concern for Baha'i youth, the school

being a means to protest government actions, and finding an outlet for community service all served as motivating factors behind the choice to align themselves with the Open University. Recognizing that this form of underground education could not survive without a comprehensive network of outside support amongst the Baha'is of Iran, Affolter notes that "BIHE channelled the social energy of the community into an experience of positive connectivity, effectiveness, and community ownership."<sup>38</sup>

The article concludes with glowing words of support for BIHE, suggesting that as a result of the resiliency demonstrated by students and the sacrifices made by faculty and community members, the school has become an arena for "youth empowerment, participatory learning, positive identity development, social cohesion, and community pride"<sup>39</sup>.

#### Related Literature on Protective Factors

The success of Baha'i students, not only at the post-secondary level, but also throughout their primary and secondary school years, is perhaps unexpected considering the message that is consistently delivered throughout the education system regarding their outcast status. Fordham and Ogbu have theorized that African American children perform more poorly at school than their white counterparts, not because of any intellectual inferiority, but rather as a consequence of being seen in that light by their white teachers and in popular culture, thus resulting in their acceptance that scholarly success is not

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid 75.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 76.

theirs to achieve<sup>40</sup>. This proves to be a self-fulfilling prophesy as prejudiced teacher attitudes results in an attitude of ambivalence expressed by black students towards education, further fueling dismissive teacher behaviours (i.e. not calling on them to answer questions, not providing sufficiently stimulating projects for them to work on). However, Iranian Baha'i students in public schools, when faced with harmful stereotypes evinced by their teachers and classmates, have often not fallen victim to the practice of embracing these negative traits. Bempechat and Abrahams, upon reviewing considerable literature in the field, have assembled four protective factors which appear to provide some measure of shielding against harmful cultural misattributes<sup>41</sup>

The first protective factor involves the ability to self-understand, which consists of being able to think about who one is and the events surrounding one's self, and then take appropriate action. The Baha'i sacred writings stress the importance of self-reflection, with meditation and prayers being recommended forms of improving and sustaining self-understanding. Baha'i individuals must engage in reflective deliberation on a daily basis, considering whether their actions have represented the spiritual ideals they claim to espouse.

The second shielding factor involves being comfortable sharing one's feelings and concerns with adults and peers. In the case of the Iranian Baha'i community, although they have been forced to suspend religious administrative operations, the social network offered by the community remains as vibrant as ever. Community members, cognizant

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<sup>40</sup> S. Fordham and J. Ogbu, "Black student's school success: coping with the burden of "acting white," The Urban Review, 1986.

<sup>41</sup> J. Bempechat and S. Abrahams, "You Can't Oppress Yourself: Negotiation the Meaning of Opportunity in Post-Apartheid South Africa," Teachers College Record, Summer 1999: 841-859.

that the youth will with certainty experience hardships within the school milieu, provide support to buffer the young against these adversities.

Supportive role models offer a third barrier against a self-defeating attitude. At the post-secondary level, a growing number of BIHE graduates continue to remain within the framework of the school, functioning as teacher assistants or as community volunteer support staff. Others go on to complete graduate level degrees at academic institutions outside of Iran, returning to Iran upon completion of these degrees to begin teaching within their respective disciplines at BIHE. As will be demonstrated within the original research component of the present study, examples also exist of professors who previously taught at Iranian public universities returning to active teaching, frequently offering courses within their homes in service of the goal of providing higher education for Baha'i youth. As the examples demonstrated in Affolter's research, in addition to the ones shown in this paper, make obvious, the Iranian Baha'i community does possess ample proof that role models exist.

The final factor identified by the researchers in the South African case study is perhaps most apt for discussion within the Iranian Baha'i context, as it involves dedication to a cause. As their study focuses primarily on South African students, they note that the period during the 1980s involved various types of collective action against apartheid within school settings, including stayaways, economic boycotts, and defiance campaigns<sup>42</sup>. The Iranian Baha'i community has similarly manifested its refusal to submit to the government's attempts to strangle the intellectual and vocational ambitions of its youth, through the creation and continuing support and maintenance of BIHE. The Baha'i

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

population, both within the country and on a global level, has refrained from public marches and overt campaigns to broadcast its objections, instead resorting to diplomatic pressure within United Nations meetings to air grievances and gather support for offences committed by the current government regime in Iran.

### Anti-Baha'i Polemics

The proliferation of misinformed stereotypes regarding the Baha'i population in Iran has occurred at least partly as a result of anti-Baha'i polemic literature that has reached its way into the minds of Iranians. Mina Yazdani, in a forthcoming article, provides several examples of 20<sup>th</sup> century Iranian literature that perpetuate myths regarding aspects of the Baha'i Faith which bear no basis in truth<sup>43</sup>.

The first text cited by Yazdani as being damaging to the reputation of Baha'is involves the character assault of a heroine of the early years of the Baha'i Faith, Tahirih, thereby strengthening the widely-held view in Iran that Baha'i women are sexually promiscuous<sup>44</sup>. Tahirih is primarily known amongst Baha'is for the act of removing her veil in the company of men, an act considered unthinkable for that time period, and thus signalling that this religion was not an offshoot of Islam but a religion in its own right. The text alludes to Tahirih's promiscuity by suggesting sexual relationships between her and others, when none occurred. It attempts to sexualize a moment in Baha'i history that is considered revolutionary in announcing the beginning of an age when men and women are considered equal, and is at least partly to blame for a society that continues to view Baha'i women as sexually immoral.

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<sup>43</sup> Mina Yazdani, "Anti-Baha'i Polemics and Histeriography," forthcoming publication.

<sup>44</sup> Sayyid Muhammad Baqir Najafi, *Bahā'iyyān*, (Tehran: Ṭahūrī, 1979) 545-547.

The second text propagates the myth that the origins of the Baha'i Faith lie outside Iran, and that it was imported inside the country in order to create dissent amongst Muslims. A memoir, allegedly written by the Russian ambassador to Iran during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dimitrii Dolgorouki, claims that the author himself convinced the founder of the Baha'i Faith to proclaim the advent of a new religion, and that this was done so to create dissent amongst Iranian Muslims<sup>45</sup>. Despite being labelled a forgery by leading Iranian historians, it continues to be widely read and considered integral to understanding a history of the Baha'i Faith.

The third means cited by Yazdani by which anti-Baha'i Iranian literature disseminates falsehoods about Baha'is, alludes to the supposed relationship between the Pahlavi regime that reigned prior to the Islamic Revolution, and the Baha'is. Several works have been written about Amir Abbas Hoveyda, prime minister of Iran between 1965 and 1977, and his alleged Baha'i beliefs, all of which are completely unsubstantiated<sup>4647</sup>. These texts assert that Baha'is received preferential treatment during the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution because of their political connections, a contention obviously fabricated considering the number of rights that were stripped from Baha'is during that period.

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<sup>45</sup> It has been published under different titles, for example: *Kiniaz Dolgoruki, or the Mysteries of the Appearance of the Babi-Baha'i Religions(!)* [Exclamation marks included in the title]. Tehran: Hafez, no date. For more on this forgery see "Conspiracies and Forgeries: The Attack upon the Bahá'í Community in Iran: A Response to Dr. David Yazdani's Article, Muslim Brotherhood—Part VIII," *Persian Heritage*. Vol. 9, No. 35, Fall 2004: 27-29.

<sup>46</sup> Afrasiyabi, *Tarikh-i Jami* 720.

<sup>47</sup> Zahedani, *Bahá'íyyat dar Iran* 240-248.

## Chapter 4

### The Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE)

#### History of BIHE

With the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime in 1979, Iran shed its status as secular state, embracing Islamic orthodoxy and shattering the delicate balance that had allowed Baha'is access to higher education through regular state universities. Although the international media focused mainly on the ensuing violence and torture inflicted upon Baha'is, they infrequently mentioned the displaced status of large numbers of Baha'i youth summarily expelled from state universities. For eight years, a new generation of Baha'is completed their high school studies and then moved into low-paying jobs that offered nothing to build a career upon. This pattern was deliberately planned, as the government intended to stifle the Baha'i community into a state of economic stagnation.

However, as history has repeatedly demonstrated with regards to the resilience of the Baha'is in Iran, in 1987 the community responded with what the New York Times described as “an elaborate act of communal self-preservation”<sup>48</sup>. The underground university would become known throughout Iran and the international stage as the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). Although termed underground here, reflecting its need to keep its activities relatively secret, the Iranian government has always known of its existence, and in fact has carried out raids and confiscations of university teaching tools over the years. It has likely been the international condemnation repeatedly directed at these acts that has prevented a complete clampdown on the school's activities.

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<sup>48</sup> Ethan Bronner, “Iran Closes ‘University’ Run Covertly by the Baha'is,” New York Times, 29 Oct. 1998: A7.

BIHE courses were originally developed by Baha'i instructors in collaboration with professors teaching at Indiana University. This university abroad had already gained a reputation amongst Baha'is in Iran for the correspondence courses it offered to the beleaguered members of this minority religion; in fact, at the time Indiana University was the only university in the world offering any academic support to the Baha'is. Initially Baha'i correspondence students registered through Indiana University outnumbered BIHE students in the late 1980s, but within several years of the founding of BIHE, its student population would increase to reverse this situation and outnumber those registered through Indiana.

The BIHE faculty for the most part consisted of Baha'is previously employed as instructors at public universities in Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution who were forced to secure income in a field wholly unrelated to their training. Generally engaged in full-time employment during the regular workday, these professors would spend their evenings marking papers and preparing course notes to be sent out to their students living throughout the country. They received little or no financial remuneration for their efforts, and quite frequently did not know the names of their students so that the safety of both sides could be maintained. For courses that involved scientific or technical laboratory work, short seminars of one week's duration were organized in the capital, Tehran, usually in the homes of professors or community volunteers. Students living in pockets of the country far removed from this centre would travel by bus for long periods of time in

order to attend, and find accommodation at the homes of community volunteers willing to risk prison time or worse for their hospitality<sup>49</sup>.

Community volunteers performed various functions depending on their locations. Those located in Tehran performed such duties as providing accommodations and classroom spaces for visiting students; arranging for the transportation of students within the city; receiving mailed exams and homework assignments and passing them on to professors; photocopying course material; and assembling small libraries of textbooks. Those located in other municipalities could act as test examiners when students gathered in small groups to write their entrance examinations or end-of-term tests. Others, somewhat knowledgeable in specific fields of study, would act as tutors when help was required<sup>50</sup>.

Over the first 11 years of BIHE's existence, courses emerged and degrees were granted in such fields as applied chemistry, biology, dental science, pharmacological science, civil engineering, computer science, psychology, law, literature, and accounting. By 1998 the student body had reached 900, and over 200 separate courses were being offered per term by 150 faculty members and countless volunteers. Small libraries developed in the homes of faculty and community organizers living throughout Iran, gradually accumulating a modest number of textbooks. Other resources included

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<sup>49</sup> This information was gathered from participant responses gathered during this research, as well as via the website created by the Baha'i International Community: <http://denial.bahai.org/>

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

photocopy machines indispensable to the process of copying materials that would be sent out to students<sup>51</sup>.

However, much of this progress was undone during the fall of 1998 when the government took concerted action designed to bring all school operations to a complete halt. Although sporadic raids and confiscations of school materials had not been uncommon leading up until 1998, this new assault was far more comprehensive. Thirty-six faculty members were arrested throughout the country; 532 Baha'i homes were raided; and property, files, and equipment used for BIHE were vandalized or stolen. The perpetrators carrying out these crimes consisted of government officers overseen by the Ministry of Information as well as governmental intelligence agencies. Those arrested were asked to sign documents attesting that BIHE had ceased to exist and that they would no longer associate with the school, which they refused to sign. International condemnation was immediate and those arrested were released; however, it would take some time before the Baha'is could once again gather the necessary resources required for the university to function.

#### BIHE Admissions Criteria and Academic Standards

From 1987 until 2003, BIHE devised its own annual national entrance examination to gauge the aptitude of Baha'i students wishing to engage in post-secondary training. Developed by an administrative committee and selected professors, the examination took a form comparable to that of the mainstream national university entrance examination, termed the "Concourse". There have been instances of

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

governmental interference in these proceedings, such as the case on July 19, 2002 when Iranian Revolutionary Guards entered three sites in the city of Shiraz and all five sites in the city of Mashhad and proceeded to confiscate examination papers and Baha'i books. Although sporadic, these acts were clearly intended to harass and demoralize Baha'i students intent on pursuing higher education<sup>52</sup>.

A more recent strategy to that end began in late 2003, when the government of Iran launched fresh plans to demoralize Baha'i youth in their attempts to begin post-secondary studies through a series of promises regarding entrance examination criteria that have proven false or misleading. Dating back to the early years of the Islamic republic, state university entrance examinations have required that applicants check off a box pertaining to their religious affiliation, with options including Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian. Although Baha'is make up the largest religious minority within the country, that religious affiliation is not provided with a box. All applications must have one box checked, or the examination will not be corrected. Subtly designed, it manages to ensure Baha'is will be left out of post-secondary institutions, without explicitly stating as much. However, in late 2003, likely as a result of continuing international criticism, the government stated that religious affiliation questions would be dropped, although students would be required to pass a religious section of their choice in the examination. Many Baha'is chose to complete this requirement in Islamic studies, as Baha'i studies were not offered, and once the final results were announced, 800 of them had been accepted into state universities. The initial excitement was short-lived when it was found to be the case that on their acceptance letters their religion was listed as

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<sup>52</sup> Iran's Campaign to Deny Higher Education to Baha'is," Closed Doors, 2005, Baha'i International Community, 20 Sep. 2008 <<http://denial.bahai.org/006.php>>.

Muslim. To disregard this duplicitous act and begin studies would have been unthinkable, considering the integral role that religious identity plays in the concept of self for Baha'is. The Baha'i students appealed their inaccurate labelling as Muslims, and were informed that changes would be made and religious affiliation would this time be removed. The actual consequence involved the decision to revoke acceptance into university for almost all 800 of the Baha'is previously accepted, leaving only 10 Baha'is approved to begin studies in the fall. In a showing of solidarity, these 10 students withdrew from their universities. This entire process repeated itself in 2005, with Baha'is labelled as Muslims once again.

In 2007, Iranian Baha'is witnessed new forms of mistreatment by the Iranian government toward its youth. Public national entrance examinations were still available for Baha'is to take, and though clearly irrelevant for acceptance into state universities, the information captured by them had been used by BIHE administrators in recent years to determine who would be accepted into its university. Statistics had always been made available to the public; however in 2007, Baha'i statistics were withheld - potentially for two reasons. One motive likely involved the government's attempt to conceal statistics from human rights organizations monitoring the plight of Baha'is, and specifically their exclusion from universities. Another objective that was met by this act was that BIHE was unable to gauge the aptitude of its applicants, resulting in a much larger than normal student population for the first semester of that academic year, which proved taxing considering the limited resources available. Other motivating factors behind the government's cycle of false promises include the intent to demoralize the younger Baha'i

generation, and to identify gifted Baha'i youth who would need to be monitored in the future with regards to how they might play a role in re-invigorating the community life<sup>53</sup>.

### BIHE Today

According to statistics published on BIHE's official website, approximately 1000 applications are processed each year for entry into the university, with approximately 25%, or 250 students being accepted into programs of study<sup>54</sup>. Although exact numbers are not available, there are roughly 3000 students currently attending BIHE throughout Iran. 14 four-year undergraduate degree programs exist, including Psychology, Social Sciences, English Literature and Linguistics, Persian Literature and Iranian Culture, Law, Architecture, Accounting, Business Administration, Biology and Medical Sciences, Applied Chemistry, Mathematics, Civil Engineering, Computer Engineering, and Pharmaceutical Sciences. Three two-year master's degree programs exist in Educational Psychology, Business Management, and Civil Engineering. In addition, two-year diplomas exist in such fields as Accounting, Music, Plant Production Technology, Civil Construction, and Computer Technology. BIHE graduates, although unable to seek entry into graduate level programs in mainstream Iranian universities, are increasingly finding their education transferable to institutions of higher education throughout the world. Holders of BIHE undergraduate degrees have now been accepted into graduate level programs at such Canadian institutions as Concordia University, McGill University, Queens University, University of Ottawa, Carleton University, University of British

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<sup>53</sup> Reported by a participant in the study

<sup>54</sup> "Quick Facts about BIHE" 23 Sep. 2008 <<http://www.biheonline.org>>.

Columbia, University of Manitoba, and a number of reputable American and European colleges<sup>55</sup>.

Although in the past, correspondence between instructors and students primarily involved the exchange of physical mail, recent years have seen the Internet becoming the chief means by which communication, homework submissions, and reporting is carried out. Despite Iranian government agents frequently attacking the BIHE website, causing it to be shut down for short periods of time, it continues to prove a safer alternative than regular face-to-face meetings, and is certainly faster than regular mail. Electronic communication is used in conjunction with several week-long in-class sessions held in Tehran per semester, depending on the course and field of study. End-of-semester exams are held in the localities in which the students dwell, generally in the home of an invigilator with no knowledge of the subject matter, whose role is then to mail the exam to the instructor's home region.

Approximately 275 faculty members currently teach at the university, including a growing number of academics outside of Iran, known as the Affiliated Global Faculty (AGF). Professors residing in various locations throughout the world are becoming more numerous as the use of online learning becomes progressively more developed. These professors are typically PhD holders who can offer such services as curriculum and course content advice, development of new courses, teaching of courses via the Internet, delivering on-site seminars as visiting professors, and helping develop formal relations

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

with universities outside of Iran for recognition and acceptance of BIHE courses and degrees.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 5

### Research and Methodology

#### Research Questions

The primary research question this paper explores involves the nature of the motivating factors and themes that have ensured the survival of the Baha'i alternative post-secondary institution in the face of a hostile government. The process of obtaining approval to conduct the study, including ethics approval, was quite involved, due to the sensitivity of the topic and the potential danger to the participants, including myself.

Initial approval for consent to interview former BIHE students was sought through the Canadian Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly in November 2005. A response indicated that consent for such research required permission from the Baha'i international governing body, the Universal House of Justice, based in Haifa, Israel. An email was immediately sent out in mid-November of 2005, and approximately one month later a response was received indicating authorization to begin research, providing that the anonymity of the participants would be maintained.

As this project was delayed for approximately two years (beginning in December 2005), the thesis proposal was not sent to the Concordia University Education Department Ethics Committee until late 2007, and it was successfully accepted on December 18, 2007.

## Methodology

Participants were selected based on their personal history of having attended BIHE or Indiana University while living in Iran for some period between its inception in 1987 and the present. An additional selection criterion required that these subjects currently reside in North America. Although clearly there exists a far larger pool for potential participants in Iran than in North America, the risks involved for potential participants residing in Iran would be too great.

The participants were initially recruited with the assistance of the Canadian Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly, as well as through word-of-mouth. The Canadian Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly has created an external position titled "Special Projects Coordinator", which fulfills various roles, one of them being to keep in contact with former BIHE students currently residing in Canada. In December 2007, this coordinator was contacted by email, informed of the consent provided by the Universal House of Justice, and asked if this request for participation in the research could be shared with all former BIHE students that her office was in contact with. The coordinator confirmed that it was feasible, and an email request was sent out to a number of these former students living throughout the country, informing them of the nature of the study, the questions that would be asked of them, the consent forms, and an email address and phone number for the researcher, should they be interested in participating.

Although this means of recruitment directly resulted in securing several subjects, the most fruitful means by which participants were found has been through less direct efforts. Once approval had been obtained from the university ethics committee in

December 2007, the researcher immediately began informing friends and contacts in Baha'i communities throughout the country of the need for volunteers who had previously attended BIHE. They were requested to pass on this call for assistance to others, with the hope that ultimately it would reach the notice of a potential participant who would then choose to volunteer. This strategy resulted in a snowball effect and the securing of several participants, who, upon completing the interview process, were in direct contact with other BIHE members to whom they advocated becoming involved with this research. It is evident that having the approval and positive participation of a few former BIHE students was crucial in the relatively rapid acquisition of additional participants, as these potential participants were reassured that the process was not invasive and that it had the full approval of Baha'i administration.

All potential participants were informed that there was no requirement that they had to participate in the research, and that the research did not constitute a formal project organized by the Baha'i community. They were also assured that at any point during the interview they would be allowed to discontinue all questions and request that the interview be omitted from the research. Furthermore, they were informed that should the participant, at any point following the interview, wish to have his/her feedback excluded, this would also not pose an issue. They were also provided with the option of directly contacting the researcher's thesis supervisor, whose phone number was provided on the consent form copy given to the potential participant. It is noteworthy that none of the participants requested that their contributions be removed after having completed the interview.

In order to protect the identities of the relatives of participants and their families who continue to live in Iran, anonymity has been maintained throughout this paper, and at no point are their names mentioned. The recordings from the interviews were transcribed solely by the only researcher involved in this project, and kept strictly confidential within a password-encrypted computer accessible only to the researcher.

The interviews were conducted primarily in person or by telephone, with a few sending in responses to the questions by email, and took place between late December 2007 and April 2008. As the researcher is not able to communicate in Farsi, all interviews were carried out in English. In-person interviews were carried out at locations deemed comfortable by the participant, namely the participant's home or the researcher's home. Public locations were excluded as concerns regarding the microphone's effectiveness in picking up speech might have been jeopardized in that type of environment. For both in-person and telephone interviews, permission was obtained to record the entire interview via dictaphone in order to capture all feedback provided, and also for the subjects to be able to express themselves at the pace with which they were most comfortable speaking, without having to concern themselves with thinking about whether it was being said too rapidly to be recorded manually.

Interview protocol remained constant for all participants, namely the asking of the same questions in the same order as written on the questions sheet previously sent to the subjects, with participants encouraged to break off into segues or relevant anecdotes as desired. Typical time frames for these interviews varied from as short as 20 minutes up to 2 hours. The qualitative nature of the study demanded that the questions be open-ended,

without containing a limited set of possible answers. Participants were given an unlimited time or space to elaborate upon their responses. At the conclusion of all interviews, subjects were told that they would be informed when the final thesis had been completed, and that they would be able to read the final report should they wish to do so.

The small sample size of the students selected for this study is clearly not representative of the approximately 3000 students currently attending BIHE, and the fact that none of the subjects are currently BIHE students reveals that the responses may differ from the sentiments of BIHE students today. Notwithstanding this limitation to the study, the findings are considered of interest and value to the Baha'i community as well as the larger community of scholars who are concerned with issues of oppression and the education of religious and other minorities throughout the world.

#### Participant Information

The 12 participants involved in the study consisted of eight males and four females. Of these students, 11 attended BIHE, and the other completed correspondence courses through Indiana University while living in Iran during the 1990s. The time periods in which they were university students in Iran varied, from as early as 1990 to as recent as 2005. These participants majored in various undergraduate fields of study, including English Literature and Linguistics, Psychology, Computer Engineering, Pharmaceutical Studies, and Civil Engineering. Three participants withdrew from classes at BIHE prior to obtaining their undergraduate degrees, for varying reasons, and the rest obtained degrees. Two participants were also accepted into Master's degree programs in

Educational Psychology and Engineering through BIHE, with one obtaining the degree and the other withdrawing from courses prior to graduation.

Interview audio cassettes were transcribed and the resultant transcripts were then analyzed for themes underlying how it has been the case that BIHE has been able to survive. These data were then organized into the clusters of themes that are presented below in the results of this study.

## Chapter 6

### Study Results

#### Motivating Themes

This section will explore the various themes extracted from the interview data, presented in conjunction with illustrative citations taken from the data, and selected religious writings from Baha'i literature that will be employed to illustrate why it is that these themes serve as motivating factors for BIHE students.

#### Encouragement from the Universal House of Justice

The first theme to be discussed involves the faith that BIHE students have in the international governing body for Baha'is, known as the Universal House of Justice (UHJ), and the reinvigorating results that letters of encouragement from the UHJ have had on students. This elected body, consisting of nine individuals, has repeatedly assured the Baha'is in Iran that this educational endeavour is not in vain, and that it represents an integral outlet for youth to preserve the religious community's vitality in Iran. One former student recollects,

*We used to receive messages from the Universal House of Justice, and those messages were conveyed to us by the (Baha'i) friends in Iran, and they encouraged us and they kindled the faith in our hearts to continue studying in spite of the difficulties.*

It is important to note that according to Baha'i holy writings, the Universal House of Justice is considered a divinely infallible body with regards to the decisions it makes. Although individual members are not bestowed with any spiritually superior ranking over

other members of the Baha'i Faith, any decisions the group makes are not to be questioned by the Baha'i community. Occasional letters from the Universal House of Justice to the Baha'i world are greatly anticipated and studied by the Baha'i international community. In Iran, although perilous if discovered by government officials, these letters continually serve as reminders to the Baha'i community that they are being remembered even at the highest levels of Baha'i administration. The rallying spirit that these letters convey to members of that beleaguered religious minority is highly influential. In a recent letter dated December 26, 2007, addressed to the Baha'is of Iran, the Universal House of Justice reflects on the persecutions the former have undergone and continue to endure, and notes the increasing awareness and denunciation with which the international and general Iranian community have responded.

*Religious and government authorities, who have always been the instigators of the cruelty meted out to you and your forebears, continue to deny you your God-given rights. They prohibit you from responding to the calumnies they spread about you and your beliefs while maintaining a climate of intimidation that severely threatens those who would come to your aid. Throughout, the international community and your fellow Bahai's from around the world have come to your defence. But now, justice-seeking, fair-minded Iranians from every walk of life in your homeland and abroad have begun to raise their voices in defence and, in growing numbers, want to know the truth about the Faith.<sup>57</sup>*

Isolated from the Baha'i community outside its national borders, BIHE students cleave to these words of encouragement that are written for them, recognizing that although at times their efforts may feel irrelevant, studying at BIHE has always held important symbolic consequences. Another student, when asked which students were most successful at BIHE, noted,

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<sup>57</sup> Baha'i Universal House of Justice. Letter to Iranian Baha'is. 26 Dec. 2007.

*For the most part, one thing that was common was this trust in the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and believing in the institutions, that this is something that is needed to be done in this period of time.*

### Confirmation of Baha'u'llah

A related theme that emerged in virtually every interview involved their faith in the confirmation of Baha'u'llah that this project would prove successful. Responses varied slightly in that some noted that the reason behind BIHE's continued success stemmed from the divinely-guided hand of the prophet founder, while others observed that knowledge of a divine confirmation served as inspiration to soldier onwards. One student, when asked why it was the case that BIHE continues to exist despite such immense obstacles, noted,

*I can only say Baha'u'llah and His assistance protects this university and its devoted staff. Its existence is like a miracle, because it survives in spite of all oppression and tyranny since the Islamic revolution.*

Another participant, not a BIHE student but a correspondent student through Indiana University, recalled the improbable progress that BIHE had achieved dating back to the early years of the school's existence.

*When BIHE started, our program (through Indiana University) was already more scheduled than BIHE, that's why I was not that interested because we see that we don't know what's going on with this. In the beginning when BIHE started it was not like it is now, and nobody imagined that one time it could be like this. But as we know, because of the Faith, for sure the confirmation of Baha'u'llah was there.*

Another student similarly notes how students have collectively recognized the role of a divinely-assisting power.

*When I first started, when the students would get together and we would have meetings, we would look at where BIHE started early on, and where it ended up. This was trust in Baha'u'llah's confirmation.*

Other students repeatedly echoed these sentiments that the school's success would not have been possible without a heavenly hand guiding it through treacherous terrain, with comments such as the following.

*In so many cases the reachable became reachable only because, I think God wanted it.*

*I think that the Baha'i community of Iran has always been under the confirmation of Baha'u'llah. I think that He is directing this Baha'i community and all of their projects. I think this is the main factor.*

*The biggest thing is the mercy of Baha'u'llah to the Baha'is in Iran. It is unimaginable how this thing could survive, if not for Baha'u'llah.*

As Iranian Baha'is believe divine justice will guide them to success, it is not surprising that this knowledge would fuel their efforts and continually serve as a reminder that their efforts would result in meaningful consequences. The cyclical and reinforcing nature of this faith is thus evident, as knowledge of divine support leads to increased efforts within BIHE settings, resulting in success, and again recognition of the mercy of God. Whether divine intervention can be proven or not, the results-producing behaviour on believers is indisputable.

#### Support and Recognition from the International Community

The growing international recognition and admiration that BIHE is receiving was also repeatedly mentioned by participants as a motivating factor. Subjects noted that it was important for them that students around the world are aware of what challenges they

were facing, and to correctly identify the situation as being a gross violation of human rights. One student noted, with regards to this specific project being carried out,

*I am very happy you are doing this. This is another kind of encouragement. This is another factor that helps BIHE to be successful. Because I've been here at ---- University and I've participated in a campaign in favour of Baha'i students for higher education in Iran, and when the Baha'i students in Iran hear this news, they get more encouraged. When they see that some people overseas are caring for them and are trying to get them education, they get encouraged.*

In a letter from the secretary of the Canadian Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly, dated March 17, 2008, Baha'is throughout the country are urged to take action through various means to publicize the increasing concern over attacks aimed at Iranian Baha'i students. Baha'i primary and secondary school teachers are asked to inform their colleagues of the circumstances in Iran, and in their classrooms to draw parallels between the suffering of Baha'i students in Iran and other civil and human rights abuses. The letter recommends inviting the local media to any events meant to publicize the mistreatment of Baha'is in Iran<sup>58</sup>.

As well, increasingly over the last several years, North American Baha'i campus associations have been organizing inter-faith discussion groups to raise awareness of the plight of BIHE students, and have engaged in letter-writing campaigns to members of their faculty and board of governors, informing them of the challenges faced by their spiritual brothers and sisters in Iran. It has been the efforts of these groups, working in conjunction with sympathetic academics and Baha'i administrative bodies that have been influential in the resulting acknowledgement by an ever-growing number of western universities that the education obtained by BIHE students is comparable to that of their

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<sup>58</sup> Baha'i World Centre Office of Public Information. Letter to selected Baha'i National Spiritual Assemblies. 25 Feb. 2008. February 25, 2008.

non-Baha'i Iranian counterparts. This emerging academic acceptance of BIHE credits has been critical for Iranian Baha'i students in seeing that their studies not only have symbolic value, but may potentially serve as the starting point for further academic study, or future employment.

*For a lot of people, BIHE was looked upon as a duty, a calling from the Universal House of Justice that this was a cause, an issue that needs to be addressed. This is why many, many people did this, enrolled in the university. And yet for a lot of people who were interested in getting an education, I think the results were a huge motivation. And as I said, as soon as the path of students coming to Canada and having their credits accepted and working on their Master's degree, I think that was a huge motivation for students knowing that what they were doing was not only important to the Faith, but they're also not just wasting their time. This was showing that not only was this a cause that the community was fighting for, but it is also outside of Iran, being looked at as a real university. It's not just a joke; it's not just a bunch of crazy Baha'is trying to establish a university. It's really working and it's really having results.*

The legitimizing effect of international academic recognition in bolstering student morale cannot be understated, considering the number of responses collected in this research that mentioned knowing Baha'i peers who dropped out of university due to being unable to foresee any practical usage of the knowledge acquired in their studies. Some participants noted they took on the role of mentor in the school's early years, providing encouragement to others when there appeared no likely utility to the studies they were engaged in.

*We had to take care of the students who often got depressed if you leave them alone, especially those living in the outlying areas, not the capital. We had to make some plans, some activities to bring them together, and some encouragement for them. Even now, these problems still exist. They get frustrated, they say, "after we finish this, then what? There is nothing, no degree, no employment..." We said "when you are studying, don't think about the material part of education, our goal was to prove that we are Baha'is, and as a Baha'i in Iran with this condition, still we continue".*

As the number of universities outside of Iran recognizing BIHE accreditation increases, it is hopeful that Baha'i students within Iran will experience fewer feelings of demoralization and futility that their studies will prove fruitless. Some may see this as being an actual opportunity for further study, while others will see it symbolic of the international community opening its eyes to a heroic endeavour worthy of legitimacy.

#### Alumni Returning to BIHE in Teaching Capacity

With an increasing number of universities outside of Iran beginning to recognize the value of BIHE undergraduate degrees, there are more and more BIHE graduates who continue on to obtain their Master's and PhD degrees from universities abroad. These students are now being urged by Baha'i administrative bodies to return to Iran to participate in the teaching at BIHE and to strengthen already-existing department programs. Participants interviewed here noted that the return of alumni to teach at BIHE has served as inspiration for younger students beginning their studies. Others noted that BIHE teaching positions, now becoming more frequently available to young Baha'i academics, although not financially rewarding, at least proved intellectually rewarding and a means of utilizing one's education. In a labour market not prepared to accept BIHE training, seeing former graduates return and invest in the community provides a glimmer of hope.

*...another problem is finding job after graduation. Students usually ask their friends or professors to introduce them to a company, but sometimes just this method doesn't work. Some students are shy or some professors are not open, and also there's limited jobs accessible by Baha'is.*

Participants described the organic nature of BIHE that those associated with it could choose to move from roles of student to teacher by following a certain pathway.

*I've been away for 8 years, but I do have friends who live in \*\*\*\*\*, and they completed their studies in North America, and then they went back and are now serving as faculty members in BIHE. It is this idea of self-...they are the products of the university and now they're back and giving back to the others. It's very encouraging.*

This participant may have been alluding to the concept of the university being self-sufficient through having its graduates return in a teaching capacity. Equipped with recently acquired knowledge and teaching experience gained through practical teaching assistant work in Western university settings, these young instructors may very well possess updated pedagogical tools and strategies not practiced by an older generation of BIHE instructors with little training within the field of pedagogy. Participants, reluctant to outright criticize the instructional methods of an older generation of professors who have exhibited courage and a willingness to share knowledge with little material recompense, suggested that this was the case, with varying degrees of directness.

*It is really important to have teaching skills. You can be an ----, but you may not have teaching skills. Because the professors in the ---- department, for example, were good ----, but some of them didn't have strong teaching skills, so they couldn't impart their knowledge to the students. This will make it a big success.*

Students are encouraged to see that the quality of teaching is improving, and that BIHE is striving to prove that not only is it a university which will survive, but that it will endeavour to provide an excellent education for its students. Those instructors with teaching styles not conducive to learning may find that rigid adherence to those principles will not allow them to survive in an environment aiming for academic distinction.

*They are now asking Master's students to teach, and as far as I know, those Master's graduates that are right now lecturers and teaching assistants, the students like them the most, the way they are teaching. Although there are older professors who are good too...but that's a trend that should be kept. And BIHE is doing that.*

BIHE alumni returning from overseas study not only possess intellectual knowledge gleaned from study abroad, but have also made contacts with faculty members and fellow students at their places of graduate study which is of great value to this developing institute. These contacts can result in potential candidates for membership in the Associate Global Faculty, providers of textbooks and articles in their respective disciplines, and links to the outside work that current BIHE students can connect with when applying for graduate programs of their own. For these reasons, as well as ones previously mentioned, it is clear that the returning alumni represent an understandably exciting development for BIHE as a whole, and the prospects of the next generation of students, in particular.

#### Means of Sustaining the Life of the Baha'i Community

Participants also voiced their sentiments that BIHE proved inspirational to students through being a means by which the Baha'i community within Iran could support an endeavour that would ensure not only the group's continued existence, but also its role at the forefront of the country's academic and intellectual advancements. Historical evidence over the previous 125 years has demonstrated that Baha'i educational projects have presented a refreshing challenge to centuries-old hegemonic norms, such as the previously noted schools for young girls, and pedagogical techniques stressing individual investigation of truth over rote memorization. Participants noted that although

periods of study did not necessarily translate into relevant jobs, the act of studying and developing a rational mind for a continuing stream of youth served to ensure that the Baha'i community would not lapse into a state of creative apathy.

*The main characteristic that would help someone be successful at BIHE is having belief and faith that these studies are not just for him, but also for Baha'i society in general, to keep this society alive. When people graduated, most of us couldn't use our degree to get a better job. For some majors, like engineering or accounting, they could maybe find a job, but for most of us, like pre-pharmacy, we just couldn't get a job as a pharmacist, because it was not an approved degree. The main thing that would make a person successful is believing that doing so, by studying, I am helping; no actually we are creating this new generation of Baha'is who are educated. Because after 30 years, not attending university, any higher education is important. The older generation who did have higher education is getting older, aging, and eventually dying. People believe that doing so helps this generation create the next generation. This would motivate the person.*

The Baha'i writings parallel this sentiment, noting the importance of acquiring education, and warning of the effects on those who do not do so, as expressed in the following quote from Baha'u'llah. Although this particular reference is with regards to an individual, it can likely be generalized for a community as well.

*Strain every nerve to acquire both inner and outer perfections, for the fruit of the human tree hath ever been and will ever be perfections both within and without. It is not desirable that a man be left without knowledge or skills, for he is then but a barren tree. Then, so much as capacity and capability allow, ye needs must deck the tree of being with fruits such as knowledge, wisdom, spiritual perception and eloquent speech<sup>59</sup>*

#### Sacrifice of Faculty and Community Volunteers

Amongst the most emphatically-stated reasons for the survival of BIHE, as expressed by former students, are the continued sacrifices made by the teaching staff and

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<sup>59</sup> Baha'u'llah, Baha'i Education: A compilation of extracts from the Baha'i Writings, (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976) 3.

those working throughout the country to ensure the overall functioning of the university. Participants marvelled at the extent to which their professors, previously holders of distinguished positions at renowned universities prior the Islamic Revolution, devoted their time, efforts, and finances to providing quality education for new generations of college-age Baha'i youth.

*I remember Dr ----, who taught ----, who during my second semester invited everyone to his house in a ---- suburb. This was a man with a PhD in ---- and a PhD in ---- from a European university. A very, very knowledgeable man. An amazing man, one of my role models. In the basement of his home, he had set up a basic science lab. He had bought {materials} so that we could carry out these basic experiments. You know it meant a lot to all of us that this individual with a high level of expertise is volunteering his time and his own money to teach the Baha'is. And all the families who volunteered their homes so we could stay with them, you know we had never met these families. You could see that the environment, the feeling, the atmosphere, this bond that ran through the Baha'i university, and that's what kept it together.*

As noted by this participant, it is extraordinary that community volunteers, with no previous acquaintance with any of the students they would host or offer their homes for classes, would willingly and gladly endanger the lives of themselves and their families for a greater cause. Throughout history, examples exist of brave individuals risking their safety to provide assistance to members of a persecuted group, and those individuals assisting with BIHE are to be included in this group.

*The faculty was all volunteers, people who would gather the assignments and mail them to Iran, and then get them back and distribute them to Baha'i friends. This was all done voluntarily. The small fee that we paid per semester was barely enough to cover the cost of shipping and photocopies and all that. A whole institution functioning voluntarily, from the students to the faculty to the people who were providing their help. So these were unique aspects of the Baha'i university, and the main reasons for its success.*

Participants, with great pride, spoke of the courage that their professors demonstrated when confronted with government agents intent on bullying and creating an atmosphere of intimidation amongst faculty and staff.

*We were in a [technical subject] class when one of the student's husbands called and said that after dropping off his wife, he saw some officials walking in front of our professor's house where we had class. After a couple of minutes, they knocked on the door and our professor went to open it. The official said we saw a couple young girls and boys came to your house, what is going on? Our professors replied in a loud voice, "I am an \*\*\*\* and these are my students, do you want to come in and observe?" And I guess they did not have dared to confront with such an angry man any more so they just left.*

Guest scholars from other countries, invited to give lectures to BIHE students, marvelled at the levels of sacrifice evinced by faculty and community support workers, never having seen anything of the type before in their lives.

*I remember a German diplomat was visiting Iran and he had heard about BIHE. He wanted to visit the labs, the classes, the professors, the libraries. And at times there were no classrooms, it was in people's homes, and the labs were in everybody's homes. So when he went and visited it was so surprising to him that how come this was a class! He also talked to the professors and asked a professor how many hours they spent to prepare materials, questions, quizzes, exams for the student. He said 40 hours per week. He was then asked how much he was paid, he said nothing, there is no payment! He couldn't believe that! I remember I had a friend who was teaching in the \*\*\*\* department, and he was working and besides that when he came home every day he would sit until two or three o'clock after midnight to prepare things for the students. So that was a big sacrifice by the professors.*

The research participants were also all too well aware of the dangers that faced anyone associated with BIHE. A Baha'i businessman, Bahman Samandari, executed in March 1992, had served BIHE in a community support role, and his death, although not ever directly linked to his role with BIHE, served as a reminder of the dangers fraught within this project.

*Mr. Samandari, he was our facilitator, he brought our exam papers to the classes, and he took exams afterwards. One night he was arrested and in a few days he was killed. That was one of the biggest shocks for us.*

Serving as role models, faculty and community support volunteers clearly exhibited inspiring attitudes and behaviours that have not only been emulated by students, but have provided a reason behind the school's continued success.

*They used their own time to grade our papers and come to Tehran, so this is with lots of sacrifice, they did, they made. I knew a couple of times that my professors were arrested, but after they were released they went back to doing their job. They didn't give up. So if not for these sacrifices, we never could have this institution running so long.*

Abdu'l-Baha, son of Baha'u'llah, uses the imagery of a seed giving its life to become a tree, when describing the importance of sacrifice. Examining the following illustrative quotation, it is clear what motivates these individuals to ignore personal hazards in order to sustain the life of the community, considering the religious doctrine they embrace.

*The seed sacrifices itself to the tree that will come from it. The seed is outwardly lost, destroyed, but the same seed which is sacrificed will be absorbed and embodied in the tree, its blossoms, fruit and branches... When you look at the tree you will realize that the perfections, blessings, properties and beauty of the seed have become manifest in the branches, twigs, blossoms and fruit: consequently the seed has sacrificed itself to the tree. Had it not done so, the tree would not have come into existence<sup>60</sup>.*

#### Sense of Solidarity with Fellow Students

Participants noted frequently that the friendships that developed over the course of their period of study were intense, often times enduring up until the present. Students learned to rely on one another, not only for academic support, but for emotional

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<sup>60</sup> Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha, Reality of Man, (New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1971) 50.

assistance during turbulent times. In an environment such as BIHE, where students often questioned the purpose of their academic pursuits in the face of an existing government that would deny its worth, having fellow companions acting as bulwarks of support was invaluable.

*I never ever in my life felt so close to my classmates as I did with those students in Iran. Although I only saw them once or twice a year, but we became very close to each other, much more close than I had with my classmates in the United States where I saw them every day. Because we shared the same problems, it was not about class status or money. I felt like, in my classroom I had 20 or 30 of my brothers and sisters there. When I said "Allah'u'abha" (Baha'i greeting) to everybody...and after the class we usually had fun going to the movies or getting together at somebody's house, hanging out, it was a very, very great experience in those terms. I never found friends like those I had in university.*

This notion of students as fellow members of a family was repeatedly used by participants in the study, clearly indicating that the bond uniting them was more than common academic pursuits. One participant noted that there were mothers in his classes who would bring their young children with them at times. Another below indicates what his peers meant to him.

*We were always so excited to see each other, like, some of them I'm still best friends with, while I met at BIHE. On my first day, we went to Tehran, Baha'is from across the country, and we gathered at individual homes. And from day one, everybody felt very close, like a family. Immediately we formed a bond and became close friends. With other friends who lived in the same city, we would get together and plan how to find books. Books would go from one student to another student. A lot of books that were handed to me were given by older students.*

Having fellow students in comparable situations to their own was important for academic success. Participants shared the view that although the friendships that formed were intense, the overall situation was difficult as face-to-face contact was minimal and much time studying was spent on one's own. One participant noted that a major challenge for her involved a lack of fellow students in her hometown, preventing the

possibility of group discussions and potential for different viewpoints to better understand the coursework. Another participant noted that her local Baha'i community arranged so that student tutors in various subjects were available for help for BIHE students. Students fortunate enough to live in Tehran noted that they took advantage of the larger student population in that region.

*In the region of Tehran I was in, there were 2 or 3 other students. We were in the same level, and once or twice a week we used to gather together and talk about stuff. And sometimes the other students who were in other cities, sometimes we had phone calls to talk about details or problems, but even if we didn't have that, we didn't feel alone. I think we were a united group, we were all together.*

Baha'i students accepted into Iranian state universities over the last 5 years have, on numerous occasions, rescinded their student status upon learning that other Baha'i university students throughout the country were dismissed for no given reason. This high regard for fellow victims on this oppressive regime could not be more different from the ultra-competitive atmosphere pervading western universities, where many individuals vie for academic excellence with little regard for others. In fact, those participants previously or currently engaged in graduate studies in North America lamented the lack of camaraderie and fellowship existing in their schools. It may not be the case that western-based students are intentionally aloof, however for former BIHE students previously exposed to an academic atmosphere stressing teamwork and genuine interest in fellow peers, the new environments do not measure up.

#### Means to Protest Governmental Oppression

Participants shared their thoughts regarding governmental policies, and noted that access to higher education represented a fundamental human right that no anti-Baha'i

regime had any authority to repeal. The Baha'i community of Iran has acknowledged that in some cases, they must obey the demands of their government, such as the dissolution of the elected national and all local spiritual assemblies, however certain fundamental rights can not be removed.

*...we can cancel Baha'i administrative bodies, but we can't cancel some certain things. First, we need to educate our children in Baha'i upbringings; we can't stop this, that's a rule. Baha'u'llah says this, and whatever you want to do, we're going to do this anyways. And then they started BIHE because they knew that they needed university, there was no other way, Baha'i communities should be educated. They're not going to allow us at their universities so we're going to start our own.*

Participants also used resistance imagery to describe their sentiments about what the Iranian Baha'i community was facing. One student described the university's resilience following the 1998 using the following words.

*...the sense that this is a battle, that this was a cause that the whole community was trying to fight for a right, a right to education. They didn't want to give up the education of the youth, even though it was banned by the government. It was a common cause and everybody was excited to help and to make this work.*

The government's strategy of persistent harassment and antagonism towards BIHE's existence provides good reason for the Baha'i community to feel they are being challenged by the dominant religious force. The participant who completed correspondent courses through Indiana University noted that she and her fellow correspondence students were bullied by those who falsely accused them of having suspicious connections to the United States. She also indicated that for her, as well as others, assignments sent by Indiana University never reached her home, and similarly completed reports that she would send in their direction were never received. Corrected

final papers were suspiciously returned long after final marks had been sent out. However despite these occurrences, students forged onwards.

*Always the government force them to stop doing their action, they somehow decrease the amount of their jobs. Nothing, I think, will stop them, will prevent them, and the government knows this.*

*BIHE is a symbol of resistance and spiritual power of the Iranian Baha'is*

It is important to note that the form of resistance taken by Baha'is, in this case the creation of BIHE, has not taken a violent or outright confrontational turn. A recent Universal House of Justice letter to the Baha'is of Iran urges them onwards, however it quotes Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha with regards to how they must respond to threats.

*Pay ye no heed to aversion or rejection, to disdain, hostility, injustice: act ye in the opposite way." "If others...poison your lives, sweeten their souls"<sup>61</sup>*

With this guidance in hand, those associated with BIHE have continued to reject the notion that they should be restricted in their higher education, and have implemented a plan that demonstrates, both to their nation's government and the rest of the world, that this can be achieved through peaceful means.

#### Importance of Education in Being of Use to Humanity

One of the fundamental reasons for human existence, according to Baha'i holy writings, is to recognize and worship God. A practical means of carrying out this duty is to be of service to humanity. Participants noted that engaging in studies within fields of higher education allowed them to obtain the theoretical skill set that would ideally one day be able to be put into practice. One participant noted,

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<sup>61</sup> Baha'i World Centre Office of Public Information. Letter to selected Baha'i National Spiritual Assemblies. 25 Feb. 2008. February 25, 2008.

*Baha'is have a duty to service the needs of citizens of its country. So Baha'is must gain an education in order to be of use to all Iranians, regardless of ethnic origin and social class.*

Participants indicated that the difficulty in not having continuous classes, the extensive travel required, the lack of adequate resources, all represented tests. They noted that in some cases, the easiest response to these challenges would have been to have dropped out and secured employment in an unrelated field, however a greater calling awaited them by remaining students at BIHE. Baha'i writings attest to the value of their dedication and steadfastness, citing "love of mankind and service to its interests as the worthiest and most laudable objects of human endeavor"<sup>62</sup>.

#### Importance of Arts and Sciences

Fundamental amongst major Baha'i principles, as noted earlier in this paper, includes the concept that religion and science can co-exist harmoniously. Participants vigorously defended this notion, charging the mainstream Iranian educational system with downplaying the relevance of science, and at times ignoring it altogether in cases where conflict between science and religion can arise.

*I think BIHE demonstrates to the modern world the harmony of religion and science is not only a dream. It also proves how a religious, academic institution can foster scholars who are comparable with other graduated students of other universities in spite of oppression and deprivation.*

Another participant, previously deprived of attending a mathematics camp for extremely gifted students, due to his religion, noted that apart from providing an education that was untainted with religious bias, it provided students with analytical and critical thinking skills they would not have achieved within the mainstream educational system.

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<sup>62</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1979) 217.

*It (BIHE) taught us how to use words, how to read reports. It is something that someone in western society is used to, you know how to research, how to find knowledge on your own here because of the educational system. But in Iran, everything is based on memorizing things. But because of the situation of BIHE, you learn how to research, how to answer your own questions by asking other people or studying different books and not just the textbook. Sometimes you have to study 6 books to understand a concept.*

Participants noted that religious studies are not sufficient in being able to provide a complete understanding of the world, and that the arts and sciences are necessary, not only to complement religion, but at times to debunk religious myths. The Baha'i writings state,

*If religious beliefs and opinions are found contrary to the standards of science, they are mere superstitions and imaginations; for the antithesis of knowledge is ignorance, and the child of ignorance is superstition<sup>63</sup>*

One participant, having studied \*\*\*\* at BIHE noted that a significant factor behind the school's success, in fact, involved the faculty's belief in the Baha'i idea that religion cannot be interpreted to explain all phenomena, at the expense of science.

*Religion is not enough for the maturation of humankind. If a person wants to become mature, he needs two wings, the religion wing and the science wing. So, the Baha'i community of Iran has been deprived of the right of education. And education of the sciences is our right, it's what we eat, it's our belief that we've come to this world to progress, to attain virtues, qualities, to know ourselves better. So it's not that we believe in Baha'u'llah and we believe whatever he said is correct, so we have everything. There is a motivation in each Baha'i to learn the sciences, to use it as a means to know ourselves better.*

Participant responses commonly praised the school's championing of concepts such as scientific inquiry and independent investigation of truth. Healthy study habits such as using creative means and resources to find solutions to problems, undoubtedly necessitated not only by Baha'i academic principles but also a lack of resources, has served those participants choosing to study in North American settings. Across a

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<sup>63</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1922) 181.

diversity of disciplines within fields of arts and science, BIHE graduates are proving that a dedication to one's religious beliefs does not preclude advocating scientific research, and in fact, in this case serves to promote it.

### Resilience of Individual Students

A final theme generated by participant responses regarding how it is the case that BIHE has been able to succeed, focuses on individual personality traits and work habits. Although participants effusively praised the faculty and community supporters, they also acknowledged that students exhibiting certain features were more likely to succeed themselves, and to contribute generally to an environment stressing academic excellence and overall survival within the school. These features all reflected various aspects of character resiliency in facing the challenges laid before them. The constantly surrounding atmosphere of oppression was summed up by one participant, who when asked to describe specific acts of antagonism he had experienced, noted that the oppression rarely took an acute form, rather, the atmosphere of intimidation was omnipresent, "like breathing". Shoghi Effendi, great grandson of Baha'u'llah stated,

*An essential characteristic of this world is hardship and tribulation and that it is by overcoming them that we achieve our moral and spiritual development<sup>64</sup>.*

This same participant observed how motivated BIHE students recognized that additional efforts needed to be put forth in order to gain knowledge, and those that did so assisted in the success of the university.

*If you want to study, even here, you can go beyond the class work and do a very good job. I can say that the majority of students are quite motivated, they are not satisfied with what they received from courses, they do not think it is enough.*

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<sup>64</sup> Lights of Guidance, ed. Helen Hornby. (New Delhi: The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of India, 1983) 494.

*They know that the textbook belongs to 20 years ago, I would remember we would go to the Internet and find other sources.*

Another student echoed this view that an intrinsic motivation for learning was needed by students should they wish to acquire knowledge, as resources were not available and feedback was limited.

*There were times when we didn't have access to an instructor or even the teaching assistants so we had to do everything on our own. We didn't have class discussions or group discussions, so everything is on you and you just read the readings and answer the questions. Those students who did well were self-disciplined, organized, and dedicated to what they were studying did best.*

It is clear from these statements that although a framework for study was offered by the university, ultimate success depended on the initiatives taken by the student.

*You have to be hard working because it was mostly you who had to do things; nobody was going to support you more than yourself. You have to be self-motivated. You have to believe in your goal and accept the situation.*

Another participant recollected the additional efforts required by her and her classmates, normally taken for granted by students having access to essential resources.

*I worked in the \*\*\*\* department for BIHE students, and at that time, because we had to prepare some quiz forms, and we had problems for that one. We didn't have a computer available, we didn't have access to up to date textbooks so we had to search to find a friend overseas to ask them to please go and search for books. Or sometimes after marking the quiz we had problems printing them or typing them because at that time were not allowed typewriters at home because they said if we had typewriters at home that meant that we were typing and distributing and making propaganda and teaching and you know.*

This participant also recalled an incident involving a BIHE student that reflected the excellent work ethic and continual striving for excellence that students demonstrated.

*One time I remember one of the BIHE Bachelor's students attended a Master's level class at another university. And when the professor asked questions, the student talked at a very, very high level, like an educated person. And that professor was so surprised and said how come and who are you, and when he found out he was so impressed. He said my students are in the Master's program*

*but they don't know anything about this, their knowledge is low, but how come you are still in the Bachelor's program, but you have so much knowledge.*

Lacking resources, BIHE students proved that through tests and difficulties, true mettle is displayed. The Baha'i holy writings repeatedly indicate that only through hardships can spiritual development occur, and that rather than fearing such adversities, humans must embrace them for providing a means to attain nearness to God.

*"Were it not for tests, pure gold could not be distinguished from the impure. Were it not for tests, the courageous could not be separated from the cowardly. Were it not for tests, the people of faithfulness could not be known from the disloyal."<sup>65</sup>*

Participant responses reflected a broad trend revealing that those students who were most successful and who able to contribute most effectively to BIHE were those who possessed an excellent work ethic, who demonstrated personal initiative in building a knowledge base, and who were able to remain dedicated and steadfast to this plan despite demoralizing external circumstances. Those who continued on to graduate studies programs at institutions in Canada and the USA indicated that not only the content they had learned, but also the skills and habits they had developed through study in such a unique environment proved to be highly transferable in their new settings.

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<sup>65</sup> Baha'u'llah, Divine Art of Living, ed. Mabel Hyde Paine (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1987) 87.

## Challenges Currently Facing BIHE

Despite the various factors that lead one to believe that BIHE will continue to succeed despite continued governmental harassment, there are clearly issues at present that may need to be addressed in order to provide the best education possible for a young Baha'i population seeking higher education. Some of these issues present challenging aspects as any attempt to resolve them could potentially endanger the school, and thus must be addressed solely by those working within the institution. Certain amongst these concerns involve matters that cannot be resolved due to the constraints imposed by external factors, and so they are not all intended necessarily as a critique of the current administration. Several of the participants involved in this research were reluctant to provide feedback regarding what types of improvement might be suggested, noting that they felt this would not be an appropriate milieu to voice any concerns. A summary of the responses of those who did wish to participate in this type of discussion is included below. It is again important to note that this research is meant to be exploratory, and not prescriptive with regards to the types of responses required to meet these challenges.

Lack of employment opportunities was frequently cited by participants as being a determining factor for student drop-outs. Feeling discouraged by a job market that, on the whole, disregards BIHE accreditation, some students did not feel BIHE was the most efficient usage of their time.

The BIHE students participating in this research did not consist of any who dropped out for this reason, however several of them noted their frustration over fellow BIHE students being prone to voicing their displeasure about job prospects or other

challenges facing BIHE students. These participants found this behaviour counter-productive, and one in particular noted,

*I think some of them are always complaining about BIHE. They should be aware of the situation, of the shortages, and do not complain. They often complain about the amount of pressure on them. I think they are not so active, they are passive, they prefer to do nothing and just attend classes and do not take part in class discussions and just go to their home. I don't know why.*

Another challenge facing students involves the travel required to commute between their home location and Tehran. Not only can this prove to be a highly time-consuming endeavour, but for those students with limited financial resources, it can be costly. Traveling may also prove dangerous for students should the motive for their journey become known to those who might feel this to be unlawful, and wish them to be punished.

Another issue that has proven to be a great challenge for some students living in extremely rural pockets of the nation involves access to the internet. Although these students do not represent a significant percentage of BIHE students, for those few, however, the increasing shift away from physical correspondence mail and towards electronic communications and submissions has left them behind their peers. Other students simply do not have the financial resources to be able to pay for internet access.

As one participant commented,

*There are students who don't have access to the Internet, they can't afford it, and they are suffering.*

Access to textbooks continues to be an ongoing issue. Some students live in regions of the country where textbooks cannot be found in bookstores, resulting in students waiting for professors to send out photocopied versions by mail or having friends purchase the textbooks in Tehran and mail them to the students. One participant

noted that although textbooks assigned by mainstream university professors would be ordered by local bookstores, this was not the case for those textbooks selected by BIHE professors. A related concern involving textbooks being outdated was also mentioned, however it was noted that this was the case for mainstream Iranian universities as well.

Several participants noted that BIHE's administration would benefit from being built up, however these responses were again tempered by the recognition that strengthening the school's internal organization could result in unwanted attention from the government. This concern is part of what prevents the school from collecting anything more than minimal fees from students, resulting in teachers having to work elsewhere in order to survive. As one participant acutely observed,

*It's obvious that if we could support professors with money, it would help BIHE, like, a lot. You can see what we are doing without money, it's incredible for me. But if we could add the factor of money, what would happen? But I don't think that we can do it, even in the next few years, because the government is really sensitive to it. If we run a university, taking money from Baha'i students, they would blame us, they would make problems based on the fact that we are doing something illegal.*

Another participant shared his experience involving numerous unsuccessful attempts to obtain his BIHE transcript while living in North America, suggesting that a better system needed to be set in place for obtaining copies of these documents for those alumni living overseas who require proof of studies.

An issue that was raised by participants who had attended BIHE in the late 1990s involved a concern over the lack of any organized, systematic means by which student feedback could be collected regarding such areas as teacher evaluation and course materials. Participants would have appreciated some form of means by which constructive criticism could have been provided through an appropriate and safe channel.

This concern over the quality of BIHE professors represented the most delicate issue touched on by participants, partly stemming from a conflict between the emotional connections felt to some of these professors and the recognition that pedagogical improvements would have been helpful. Participants, when providing commentaries on the teaching staff, were quick to point out that not all professors lacked training or professional knowledge, and that a new generation of teaching assistants and professors with graduate studies acquired overseas were emerging. They also noted that the issue was not only restricted to the quality of the professors, but also to the limited numbers of professors available, and the difficulties associated with not being able to frequently talk things over with them. However, despite these attempts to soften the language of criticism, concerns remain regarding overall quality.

Another concern relates to inconsistencies in classroom protocol and teacher expectations that have led to confusion amongst students regarding what type of behaviour is to be expected, as stated by the following participant.

*They have tried to establish some policies, some standards, but I cannot see any integration. I know that the teachers do not behave the same way, their expectations differ, there is no standard for how one should teach, for example, computer engineering. There must be some kind of uniform way of teaching. One teacher will come to class and say that nobody should leave the class while I'm teaching, and no one should come later than this time, and the other says "oh it's OK, you can come whenever you want", so the students do not know.*

Older participants in the study, never having been taught by the new generation of professors trained abroad, lamented the lack of pedagogical training of professors in their fields. They noted that although these professors possessed in-depth knowledge of the subject matter, they were not always effective in being able to convey this knowledge to the students. According to another participant,

*It is really important to have teaching skills, you can be an engineer but you may not have teaching skills. Because the professors in the civil engineering department, for example, were good engineers, but some of them didn't have strong teaching skills, so they couldn't impart their knowledge to the students.*

Students noted that younger professors with innovative teaching styles learned from study abroad were proving more popular amongst students than their older colleagues. This appreciation of professors trained in being able to impart knowledge extended to the Affiliated Global Faculty, who were frequently mentioned by participants as being a key asset for the BIHE community in being able to continue to pursue academic excellence. Students noted that prior to the connections formed through the AGF, there was little opportunity to interact with academics outside of Iran. They also noted that they felt this resource was not being tapped to its fullest potential, and that it was the responsibility of both Baha'i scholars and other scholars sympathetic to the plight of Iranian Baha'is, to assist in the development of BIHE. Others agreed that increased reliance on the AGF would prove beneficial, however they suggested that seasoned professors within BIHE were proving resistant to this opportunity.

*I don't think that BIHE is taking advantage of professors outside Iran, because we have the opportunity to ask for help from other professors using the internet. It's like, to plan a development for a country, we can't say "we enter this many human resources and everything will be fine". No, you need to adapt the administration to the needs of those it is overseeing. So it is actually adapting very well, accepting other professors and allowing them to teach, but there are professors who want to actually keep their courses that they used to have. But it is changing.*

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion**

Twenty-one years after its founding in 1987, there can be no doubt that the continued survival of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education in Iran counts as a tremendous success for the persecuted Baha'i community within that nation. Faced with a governmental regime that does not allow them to attend universities and has never given any indication that it will ever consider BIHE accreditation legitimate, Baha'i students have forged onwards despite the uncertainty of what weight their studies will ever carry in their home country.

The research conducted in this paper has attempted to identify some of the key factors that have resulted in what can only be described as a triumph of educational rights. Through the interviewing of 12 students currently living throughout North America who were prevented from entering mainstream universities in Iran and thus had to resort to alternative means for obtaining higher education, it has become clear that there exist a number of causes that have resulted in the school's continued existence.

The sacrifices of faculty members and community staff within Iran, as well as those belonging to the Affiliated Global Faculty throughout the world have proven invaluable, significantly notable considering the absence of any financial remuneration for the services these individuals are rendering. The glowing words of encouragement from the Baha'i international body, as well as the calls for justice voiced by Baha'i and non-Baha'i students and scholars throughout the world have been inspirational to those studying in Iran, and a reminder that they are not being ignored on the international stage. Students have also found it comforting to see increasingly more of their peers being

accepted into graduate studies programs abroad, who then return to Iran afterwards to continue assisting with the development of BIHE. This has resulted in increased feelings of optimism regarding career opportunities, both within Iran and outside.

Students have also chosen to continue their academic studies at BIHE due to the high level of importance placed on education within Baha'i holy writings. The life and vibrancy of the community is dependent on the education of the younger generation, and there is a legitimate fear that should higher education be stifled, the creative energy of the community would be adversely affected. Related to this idea of the importance of education, is the value that the arts and sciences have been given in Baha'i scriptures, as a means to act in partnership with religious education, neither of which should negate the other. Baha'i students have also found it reassuring to believe that they were being protected from external sources of antagonism and harm through prayers for assistance and tests, and the confirmation of the prophet-founder, Baha'u'llah.

BIHE students have also derived motivation for their efforts by seeing the school as a sign of defiance against the government's attempts to restrict their educational ceilings. The higher education institution serves as a peaceful way of demonstrating to the authorities that this human right will not be taken away. BIHE also provides an outlet for the fulfillment of a duty that all Baha'is must carry out, that of service to humankind. These Baha'is believe that once the veils of tyranny are lifted, the skills they have acquired will permit them to be of use to their fellow citizens.

BIHE students also noted that the friendships developed during these challenging years of study provided a buffering effect. Peers offered not only academic assistance, but also emotional and spiritual upliftment during periods of hopelessness. Lastly, certain

individual characteristics were essential, not only for the success of the individual student, but for maintaining the vitality of the school. Those who were resilient, showed excellent work ethic and personal initiative, and remained detached from the government's attempts at demoralization, were most successful at navigating through their studies.

Feedback received from those former BIHE students participating in this research also points to various obstacles preventing BIHE from reaching its highest potential. Certain faculty members possess outdated or no pedagogical training, and there is still a need for further assistance from the international academic community to assist with BIHE. There is also a lack of consistency with regards to faculty expectations in areas ranging from student behaviour to curriculum development. Routine opportunities for student feedback that would identify these inconsistencies have not yet been created.

Students living in outlying regions of the country also continue to struggle with access to the internet, needed for courses, and for many students the time and cost required to travel to Tehran for classes can prove difficult. Textbooks are not easy to acquire, putting the onus on professors and friends in larger cities to send them by mail. Lastly, although universities abroad continue to recognize the legitimacy of BIHE accreditation, it remains, however, difficult for BIHE graduates to find employment within their fields, considering the lack of weight their degrees hold in Iran.

#### Future Directions

Despite these challenges, there is good reason to be confident that BIHE will continue to survive and provide post-secondary training for Baha'i youth. Future directions indicate that the shift towards online learning represents a safer alternative to

classroom settings, as well as a means to integrate international academics eager to participate in this form of resistance education. As well, as increasingly more BIHE alumni return to Iran from graduate and post-graduate programs abroad, the university will have access to a growing number of potential teaching staff armed with knowledge and skills likely superior to that of their mainstream Iranian counterparts. These future leaders, like the participants interviewed for this research will also be able to recollect on how these formative years proved pivotal in directing of their lives.

*You know this all takes me back to that time 8 or 9 years ago. In my head I'm back in those times of getting in the bus at night, and between my city and Tehran it was a 9 hour bus ride. And we'd arrive in Tehran early in the morning and take a cab. All we were given was an address, a time, and the name of the class. We would knock on the door, say Allah'u'abha and we were welcomed in. It was a very interesting experience.*

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## APPENDIX A – Consent Form

### **Consent Form to participate in an exploratory study examining the qualities associated with the survival of underground education in oppressive environments**

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Nayyer Ghadirian in the department of Education at Concordia University, who may be contacted by telephone at (403) 383-0011, or by e-mail at nayyer\_ghadirian@yahoo.ca

#### **A. PURPOSE**

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is to explore the nature of the individual, organizational, and spiritual qualities that have ensured the survival of this educational endeavour in the face of a government that is determined to exclude the younger generation of the Baha'i community from access to higher education.

#### **B. PROCEDURES**

This research will be conducted either in face-to-face conversations, by telephone, or through written response forms. The participant will be asked to answer the questions as best they can, and it is not expected that the time required will exceed more than one hour. All information used in this research will be kept anonymous and names will never be revealed. The participant should be aware that at any time he or she may decline to answer a specific question, or may withdraw from the research project completely, without having to provide specific reasons. Should a participant withdraw from the study all data associated with that person will be destroyed.

#### **C. RISKS AND BENEFITS**

The risks of participation includes the potential discomfort of recalling a period in one's life that may be painful to recollect, however the benefits include being able to participate in providing useful knowledge in understanding how both this school has been able to thrive, and how this may be transferable to other schools in similar settings. The benefits also include, via the researcher's masters thesis, increasing awareness of the plight of the Baha'is in Iran, which warrants universal recognition.

#### **D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION**

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at anytime without negative consequences.
- I understand that my participation in this study is confidential.
- I understand that the data from this study may be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Adela Reid, Research Ethics and Compliance Officer, Concordia University, at (514) 848-2424 x7481 or by email at [areid@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:areid@alcor.concordia.ca).

## APPENDIX B – Sample Questions

What years did you study at BIHE?

Did you have to pass an entrance examination? What kind of examination was it?

What degree did you receive from BIHE, and have you taken any further training elsewhere?

How were the classes: distance, classroom, a combination?

How large were your classes, or was that irrelevant through distance learning?

Was there a professor guiding you, teaching assistants, or a combination?

How were you tested? Were there also reports, projects to hand in?

Did your BIHE training sufficiently prepare you for coursework in Canada, or work here?

Did you experience any direct, overt repression by any person or governmental agency?

What were some of the biggest struggles for you during this time, as a student at BIHE?

What are the characteristics of those students at BIHE who did best, or theoretically speaking, what types of personalities would be best suited to thrive at BIHE?

Did you feel a sense of solidarity with fellow BIHE students? Did you know who they were?

What do you think has allowed BIHE to survive in spite of this oppression?

Are there any factors that have allowed this school to survive, which are specific to the Baha'i case, and might not be present in a different school in similar settings?

Based on your experience, do you have any comments for improvement of the BIHE system?

Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?