

RESEARCH

Religious Persecution & Oppression: A Study of Iranian Baha'ís' Strategies of Survival

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Members of the Baha'í faith in Iran have been ongoing targets of systematic oppression, persecution, and extreme hate since the religion was founded in 1844. Despite there being a large diaspora as a consequence of their persecution, Baha'ís remain a thoroughly underexplored population in the field of hate studies, in addition to being neglected in most other fields as well. The Baha'ís' experiences and unique positionality as ethnic insiders and religious outsiders in their home country provide important and distinctive insights into their survival and response strategies in the face of violence, trauma, and persecution. Drawing on fifty in-depth interviews with Iranian Baha'í refugees in the United States, my research identifies and explores three ways that members of this religious community responded to their persecution: 1) passing as Muslim, 2) religious constancy in the face of danger, and 3) alternating passing with open displays. Several scholars have identified the persecution of this population as an attempted genocide, however there continues to be a lack of an international response to the human rights violations experienced by Baha'ís in Iran. As a consequence, members of this community remain caught between their own safety and authentically living their lives as members of this religious community.

Introduction

Members of the Baha'í faith in Iran have been ongoing targets of systematic oppression, persecution, and extreme hate since the religion was founded in 1844. As a consequence of this persecution, there exists a significant diaspora community of Iranian Baha'ís outside of Iran. Despite this large diaspora, Baha'ís remain a thoroughly underexplored population in the field of hate studies, in addition to being neglected in many other fields as well.

The Baha'ís' experiences and unique positionality as ethnic insiders and religious outsiders in their home country provide important and distinctive insights into their survival and response strategies in the face of violence, trauma, and persecution. The Baha'í faith is Iran's largest minority religion and has approximately five million members in over 180 countries all over the world. About 350,000 (ca. 0.5% of the population) Baha'ís reside in Iran (Baha'ís of the United States, 2009; Cameron & Danesh, 2008; IHRDC, 2006; Kaussler, 2012; Rehman, 2019) which has a current estimated population of 66–69 million (CBC, 2009; Hassan, 2007). In the United States, the number of official members of the Baha'í faith is ca. 180,000 (Pluralism Project, 2021).¹

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Treatment of Baha'ís in Iran

One of the main teachings of the Baha'í faith is the oneness of mankind through unity in diversity. It also teaches the equality of women and men, the underlying unity of religions, and the need to eliminate prejudices of all types. This religion strongly promotes the need for universal peace and the importance of human rights (Cameron & Danesh, 2008). The Baha'í world community has been very involved with the United Nations as well as several NGOs around the world in order to promote human rights and peace globally (Baha'í World News Service, 2004; IHRDC, 2006).

¹ This number only includes those Baha'ís and their children who have officially declared as believers through the national Baha'í community. Individuals who regularly attend Baha'í events without this "declaration" are excluded from this count.

Despite the Baha'ís peaceful teachings, the Islamic leaders of Iran see them as a threat to Islam and have systematically discriminated against them (Baha'í World News Service, 2004; Hassan, 2007; Rehman, 2019). The issue lies in the fact that the Baha'í faith was founded after Islam, thus clashing with the Shi'a interpretation of Islam that a 12th Imám named the "seal" will return. The Baha'ís believe that this 12th Imám has already returned and was not "a seal" but rather "a gate" to a new era—the start of the Baha'í religion (the Arabic word contains both definitions) (Buck, 2003; Handal, 2007; IHRDC, 2006). For this reason, the faith is rejected by the Muslim clergy and leadership in Iran and Baha'ís are considered heretics. Baha'ís are considered to have converted out of Islam, which is punishable by the death penalty in Iran (Schirrmacher, 2009).

In 1955, the persecution became more widespread when Mohammad Reza Shah gave up control over a number of religious affairs and delegated authority to the clergy (Akhavi, 1980; IHRDC, 2006; Momen, 2010). The result of this shift in power was a systematic anti-Baha'í campaign. With permission from the Shah, during the month of Ramadan, one very powerful religious leader in Teheran started a violent propaganda scheme (IHRDC, 2006; Momen, 2010). This campaign encouraged and led to mob violence, murders, destruction of homes and Baha'í centers, desecration of cemeteries, expulsion from schools and employment, and the abduction of women who were forced to marry Muslims. Eventually, as the violence escalated, the government tried to stop the propaganda sermons, but the Sheikh refused, as did many other religious leaders around the country (IHRDC, 2006; Momen, 2010). Throughout the years following the revolution these widespread ideas served to continue both systematic and spontaneous acts of persecution.

Following the Islamic revolution in 1979, the first step was to make all non-Muslims in Iran second-class citizens, without civil rights (Baha'í World News Service, 2004; Cameron & Danesh, 2008; Hassan, 2007; IHRDC, 2006; Kausler, 2012). The Iranian government made exceptions for a few protected minorities: Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians. Although the Baha'ís make up the largest religious minority in Iran, they did not receive even those limited rights (FIDH, 2003; Hassan, 2007).

Special "guidelines" were put in place to deal with the "Baha'í issue" (Kausler, 2012; Rehman, 2019). This "represented a state-led plan to repress the Baha'í community. Among other things, it mandated routine surveillance of the Baha'ís and imposed severe restrictions on the practice and public expression of the Baha'í faith" (Kausler, 2012: 75). As a consequence, many members of this religion have suffered physical violence; have had their homes burned down; and have been fired from their jobs, and have had their businesses taken away (Baha'í World News Service, 2004 and 2008). In addition, Baha'ís have not been allowed to attend universities in Iran or hold religious meetings, all in an attempt to force them to convert to Islam, a demand that is a betrayal of their faith (Baha'í World News Service, 2008 and 2004; Bollag, 1998; IHRDC, 2006).

Besides attacking members of this community, the Islamic leaders also destroyed many of the buildings and ancient sites that survived the previous attacks preceding the revolution. Many more houses were torn down and grave yards were dug up. These actions were a continued effort of destroying the physical history of the Baha'í faith without attracting too much international attention and criticism (Baha'í World News Service, 2004).

Between 1978 and 1998 over 200 Baha'ís have been killed in Iran (Baha'ís of the United States, 2009; Rehman, 2019). Most of these deaths were through execution. However, in the same time frame, thousands have been imprisoned or otherwise persecuted exclusively due to their membership in the Baha'í faith (Baha'ís of the United States, 2009). Accurate data for deaths since 1998 is not available. A special U.N. report from 2012 found that close to 500 Baha'ís have been arrested between 2004 and 2011 (Kausler, 2012).

Rehman, the United Nations' Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human rights in Iran, reported that since 2005 more than 1,168 Baha'ís had been arrested and charged with "vaguely worded offences," since 2013 there had been over 800 violations of economic rights, and that in 2019 "the court of appeal of Isfahan reportedly condemned, in separate judgments, nine Baha'í citizens to a total of 48 years of prison. They had been charged with 'membership of the illegal Baha'í community and propaganda against the regime by spreading the Baha'í faith in the society' (Rehman, 2019: 14).

International Responses to the Treatment of Baha'ís in Iran

For nearly 20 years, from 1982 to 2001, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights passed a resolution opposing the overall human rights situation in Iran, as well as the persecution of Baha'ís, specifically (Buck, 2003). However, little has been done to prevent injustices from happening. There have been many more recent human rights violations, including the arrests of the seven Baha'í leaders (and their sentencing), as well as the arrests of 50 youth who were volunteering with a non-profit organization to teach non-religious subjects such as math and English to underprivileged children in Shiraz (Affolter, 2005; BBC, 2008; Buck, 2003; HRW, 2006; USDS, 2008).

Several scholars have marked the situation of Baha'ís as fitting the U.N. definition for genocide and suggest that even if the numbers of those dead does not yet compare to those of other genocides, Iran clearly intends to eliminate this group and is currently conducting an ideological genocide (Affolter, 2005). Some have argued that the treatment of Baha'ís is a case of attempted genocide and questioned why the international community has not acted more forcefully to end their persecution in Iran. For example, while Harff and Gurr (1988) differentiate between genocides and politicides and classify the persecution of Baha'ís as a politicide—defined as "mass murders targeted at political parties" (p. 363), when evaluating

their criteria, and recognizing Baha'ís more accurately as a religious rather than political group, the more appropriate classification would be xenophobic genocide—defined as ‘mass murders of ethnically, religiously, or nationally distinct groups’ (p. 363). Despite this clear evidence, Iran has not been charged with crimes against humanity.

In the absence of any kind of meaningful international response that results in the change of the treatment of Baha'ís in Iran, members of this community have been left to develop their own survival strategies in the oppressive, violent, and hateful environment they face. As described in the findings section, members of this religious community tended to use one of three strategies in response to their oppression and persecution—passing as Muslim (while internally holding on to their Baha'í faith), religious constancy or open displays, and wavering between the two dependent on the context.

Methods

The sample population for this research consists of a snowball sample of 50 first generation Iranian immigrants in the United States who are members of Baha'í families. This includes 29 women and 21 men, ranging from 18–83 years old. Thirty-eight percent of the sample lived in Washington, 38% in Colorado, 14% in the Bay Area and 10% in New Mexico at the time of the interview. Their time of arrival in the United States varied from as recently as six months prior to the interviews to before the 1979 revolution in Iran. Their persecution histories also varied greatly, but all have experienced at least some level of consistent oppression while living in Iran due to their religion. Due to the potential risk to family members remaining in Iran should the identities of interviewees be uncovered, I worked to de-identify the data as best as possible. In addition to the use of pseudonyms, I only present demographic information in aggregate form as part of the protective measures taken.

The data were collected from 2010–2014, using semi-structured in-depth interviews. The use of semi-structured interview protocols allowed for flexibility in adapting the questions to follow a more natural conversation flow rather than a strict and set path which is vital to building rapport with participants (Baca Zinn, 2001; Marshall and Rossman, 2006). This approach also allowed for additional unanticipated information to be shared by the interviewees making the collected data more comprehensive and reflective of their experience. The interview schedule included questions concerning the experience of discrimination in Iran, the challenges of emigration, the importance of religious observance, and the survivors' views on the significance of religious preservation and retaining the memory of trauma within the family.

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to be cautious about the possible impact of the researchers' personal biographies on the research (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Interviewing survivors of religious persecution requires a great deal of sensitivity, and I worked to minimize the impact of my presence on the interview process as best as possible. Differences between the characteristics of the researcher and research participants can create difficulties in gathering rich data (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Being an insider as a first generation immigrant and Iranian Baha'í was very beneficial for me as a researcher in this process (Baca Zinn, 2001).

I believe that, most importantly, my insider status facilitated trust building with the respondents. Living in Iran was associated with constant risk of exposure and persecution. Metaphors describing living in Iran as “living as sheep among wolves in sheep's clothing” was a common sentiment among the interviewees. Many Baha'ís in Iran were socially isolated and only socialized with other Baha'ís. Individuals and families became connected through informal social networks within the Baha'í communities. These social networks were considered to be safe and trustworthy. As soon as potential interviewees learned that I was also a Baha'í, they trusted that it was safe to speak with me. As with interviews in general, I often found that this trust grew throughout the interview process as the respondents became more and more comfortable sharing their stories and they realized that I fully believed them. My membership in their community, even if through distant networks, meant I was “safe” and did not have a hidden agenda. My intentions as a researcher and my commitment to keeping their involvement in the research confidential was trusted based on my being a Baha'í and therefore being someone who understands the risks involved.

My fluency in both English and Farsi allowed me to conduct the interviews in the language most comfortable to the participants, many of whom preferred to conduct the interviews in Farsi or a mix of Farsi and English. This option proved especially vital in interviewing these first generation immigrants, given the large variation in length of time since their arrival in the United States, as well as their English-speaking ability. Most of the interviews were conducted with a mix of English and Farsi, but 70% were conducted primarily in English and 30% primarily in Farsi. Further, 78% percent of the interviews were conducted face to face and 20% were completed with the assistance of a video chat. Only one interview was conducted over the phone because the interviewee did not have the computer skills to use a video chat.

At the time of the interview, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form and I stressed the voluntary nature of the interview and ensured that the participants understood that they could decline to answer any question or stop the interview all together at any point during the interview. All of the interviews were conducted in interviewee's homes, private work offices or in a private room at a public library. With permission of the participants, all of the interviews were tape-recorded. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 6 hours with an average length of two hours. Following data collection, the interviews were coded and analyzed.

Data analysis took place in several phases. First, the interviews were translated, if necessary, and transcribed verbatim. During the transcription process all names from interviews were replaced with pseudonyms. Upon transcription, the data were coded in multiple stages, including line-by-line coding of several interviews to create a general coding scheme, which was used on all transcripts—adding new concepts and themes when needed. The concepts were eventually analyzed into a theoretical framework to describe the relationship among the discovered categories (Charmaz, 2001; Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

Overall, this research was based on a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I conducted some literature review during the design phase of this study but limited it to a general understanding of the gaps in the existing literature. Further, because of the dearth of research on Iranian Baha'ís, most of this research focused on the experiences of persecution and exile of other populations. After the design phase of the project, I refrained from further engagement with the existing literature until after the data analysis phase was concluded. Initially, I drew on my own experiences in the design stages of this study. My analysis, however, revealed findings that both confirmed my perceptions and also others that were completely different from my initial expectations.

One potential limitation of this research is that it does not capture the voices of those who permanently left the Baha'í faith in response to their suffering. Given the focus of the larger project for which this research was conducted, I did not locate individuals who no longer identify as Baha'í as part of my sample. However, this paper aims to center and explore the survival strategies of Baha'ís in Iran who continue to believe in their faith despite the persecution they experienced. Therefore, while important to note this limitation, it does not detract from our learning about this particular population of focus.

Findings

In this section I discuss the three major ways that members of the Iranian Baha'í community have responded to the persecution they have suffered. The first group consists of individuals who pass as Muslim either while maintaining their belief internally or sometimes permanently recanting their faith. The second group responded to their persecution through overt resistance, openly displaying their Baha'í identity. The last group, which was the largest, often utilized both strategies of passing and claiming their Baha'í identity dependent on the context.

During the interviews, the interviewees reported consistently that the revolution created a strong divide in the country between those who followed the more conservative and fundamentalist government after the revolution and those who (Muslim or not) do not support this government. The interviews contained some examples of Muslims who secretly helped Baha'ís in difficult situations. For example, a few respondents recalled a neighbor who allowed them to hide in their home when the revolutionary guard came to look for them in their residence. However, the interviewees reported that most Muslims did not demonstrate such public support for the Baha'ís because of the risk to their own lives and livelihood.

At a time where many neighbors were encouraged and rewarded for spying on each other, any support or sympathy from non-Baha'ís provided a welcome reprieve or refuge for the members of the Baha'í community. However, given the large absence of these forms of resistance by Muslim neighbors, most Baha'ís could only rely on themselves for safety and survival. In the analysis of the coded interviews, three distinct modes of response emerged.

Three Modes of Response

Passing as Muslim

Baha'ís in Iran have become constructed as an 'untouchable' and 'less than human' group. This stigma has served in creating a hostile environment within the larger culture. Goffman describes the attitudes a society holds towards a person with stigma:

'by definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, and often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents' (1963: 5).

In response to their stigmatization and the associated dangers within Iranian society, some Baha'ís chose to pass as Muslims. Kanuha (1999) defines passing as a social interaction strategy in which a person represents themselves as different from their true identity, in order to manage social stigma. This strategy is not unique to Baha'ís, but rather has been used by many groups throughout the past when they faced discrimination and oppression, including Christians living in Islamic countries such as Egypt, Christians living in India, and Jews living in Europe (Brown, 1991; Deluca, 2006; Hodge, 2006; Jacobs, 2002; Kurien, 2014; Sanchez & Schlossberg, 2001; Schirmacher, 2009; Zeidan, 1999).

Among my respondents, passing was the least commonly discussed response strategy. This is not surprising, given that they self-selected to participate in this research and thus fled Iran and gained refugee status as Baha'ís. However, a handful of individuals also mentioned that some Baha'ís in Iran converted to Islam during the height of the revolution, in order to avoid loss of employment and other types of persecution. There are many second and third hand accounts of people

converting, who lost their support from the Baha'í community but who did not attain real membership in the Muslim community because they were suspected to be Baha'í spies. An example of this pattern is found in the following narrative:

'Some of them were concerned about their safety and things like that. But then some of them also had stories about how they were brave. And some of them were scared, so some of the people recanted the religion, but not a lot, just a few. But others got braver and became closer and steadfast. So a family that became closer to each other they would help each other, but the people who recant the faith got worse because they went in and the Muslims persecuted them worse because they said they may be spies.'

The data show that the most commonly reported cause of conversion to Islam was family. Baha'í women who were married to Muslim men before the revolution or whose husbands converted during the revolution were often faced with the probable loss of their children and family if they did not also appear to convert to their husband's religion. Neda provides one such example:

'They literally forced some of the Baha'ís to change their religion. And one of those people was my aunt. My dad's sister, her husband became Muslim. And he took all of the kids away from my aunt—all three of them, even the newborn—my aunt for one year didn't see her kids. She was going crazy. She couldn't handle it anymore. Yeah, she left the faith. If she would have never converted, she wouldn't have seen her kids for the past 26 years. I mean, these are the tough decisions that people have to make. Deep down, my aunt is not a Muslim. She would never be a Muslim in a billion years. But I feel she has been forced into it because her husband left her with no choice.'

As Neda describes, her aunt waited a full year before she also converted to Islam. This suggests that her decision to convert was tremendously difficult for her and strongly influenced by the loss of her children. It is also possible that some individuals lost their faith in the Baha'í religion because they could not imagine that such terrible persecution could happen if they were on the right path. Stein (2014) reports cases of Holocaust survivors renouncing their faith in [G]od after enduring and witnessing horrific atrocities that made it difficult for them to believe that a [G]od could exist.²

There was only one respondent in my sample who stated that he himself left the Baha'í faith in response to the dangers he experienced in the time immediately following the revolution, although he later re-declared as a Baha'í after fleeing the country. Here Shayan describes this difficult time:

'Honestly, I don't know. Hopelessness. That's when I started smoking. Then the war was raging. I had a few Muslim friends and they went to the war, then I decided that religion is not a good thing so I started my political activities and left the faith. I was afraid, afraid to be stabbed, to be raped. I've seen horrible things in Iran. Not happened to me, but it made no difference.'

There were other interviewees who described the state of Iran under Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) to be very similar to that of the time immediately following the revolution (1979–mid 1980s). Many of the respondents agreed that during the presidency of Khatami (1997–2005), there was a temporary easement in the persecution of Baha'ís, giving them at least some rights to gather and observe their faith. Given the accounts provided, it is difficult not to wonder how these interviewees would have responded in regard to membership in their religious community had there been some protections for this minority population in Iran.

Religious Constancy in the Face of Danger

When describing the experiences of persecution among Baha'í children in Iran, it became clear that many parents coached and taught their children how to respond to acts of persecution through remaining steadfast to the principles of their faith. It is not surprising then that many of the interviewees who were adults when they lived in Iran similarly responded to acts of persecution with pride and steadfast commitment to their religion. Many of the interviewees, both men and women, explained that while difficult, it was a privilege to sacrifice their own freedoms in the name of their religion. It is important to note, however, that there was a clear tension between wanting to serve their faith and the pain and anguish they felt as a consequence of their experiences. A person can both hold strongly to their Baha'í identity and at the same time yearn for a life free of oppression and persecution.

There are numerous examples of both men and women refusing to convert to Islam even under severe pressure. One example comes from Khatereh, a young woman who was arrested at the age of seventeen after a neighbor reported a Baha'í

² Although they did not necessarily renounce Judaism.

gathering. The police arrested everyone at the party and she was jailed for three days. While in prison, she was told multiple times to convert to Islam:

'They said that you should say that you are Muslim. Then we let you go. And there were ... I guess twenty girls that we were in one cell and none of us said yes. They asked us many times. Eventually after three days, they made us sign that we are not attending any parties or anything... for two years my dad didn't let me go anywhere. For two years, he was really scared.'

Khatereh was also very scared during this time in jail and she felt shameful that her "gray haired father" had to beg the young guards to release his daughter. She felt guilty that he had to beg for her freedom. At the same time, the excerpt above demonstrates that she felt proud that neither she nor her women friends agreed to deny their belief in the Baha'í faith in exchange for their freedom.

It is interesting to note that this interviewee did not declare as a Baha'í until she was nineteen, even though she was raised in a Baha'í family.³ It was not until she received her admittance to the university by claiming a Muslim identity that she decided to declare as a Baha'í, which automatically prevented her from attending the university. Khatereh still shows shame for having taken the entrance exam under the guise of being a Muslim, while her friends were excluded because they identified as Baha'í on the forms. Recognizing the injustice of the discrimination, Khatereh made a moral choice to sacrifice her educational opportunity and to stand steadfast with her friends and religious community.

Both men and women equally shared stories such as Khatereh's where they remained steadfast in their faith or became strengthened under pressure from Muslims, despite possible known and unknown consequences. Many of the respondents expressed that it was dangerous for them if non-Baha'ís knew of their Baha'í identities. Therefore, any time a Baha'í was faced with the question of their religious membership, they had to make a conscious choice to either claim their Baha'í membership or hide it. The following case is an example of this kind of dilemma:

'My neighbor said: I have heard something... I hope it's not true. I said... well, what did you hear? And he said he has heard I am not a Muslim... He said: You cannot be Baha'í. I said, why? And he said, are you a Baha'í? ... but you don't look like a Baha'í. And I said, what's the difference? He said you respect everybody. You are coming and going everything... are very organized... and I said, Yeah... maybe that's because I'm a Baha'í.'

Despite the danger of disclosing his identity, Shahab felt it was important to explain to this neighbor, who was a member of the local clergy, that his ideas about Baha'ís were misconceptions. The neighbor was conflicted about his beliefs about Baha'ís and who he knew his neighbor to be. Shahab is one example of the men who felt pride and had confidence in their ability to navigate the Iranian system. Despite the risk to and persecution of Baha'ís, he often continued to teach his faith to others.

Baha'ís see their religion as a gift to be shared with others. The following excerpt is from my interview with Fariba, who is now in her eighties and whose husband was executed in Iran. She states that it is important not to hide one's Baha'í identity:

'I don't tell them [my children] if there's danger don't say I'm Baha'í or whatever, no. No. Because we believe the Baha'í faith is a solution and cure for this sick world. And right now you can see the people that—the leaders—they don't know what to do, because economy is going to be worse. And the only solution Bahá'u'lláh (the prophet of their faith) brought and then nobody listen. And my husband gave his life and he said, I give my life...why should I be Muslim? They ask him to become Muslim we let you go. And he says why I be Muslim...why should I become Muslim? I'm Baha'í and I believe to Bahá'u'lláh as something that helps to rescue this sick world. Why should I be Muslim? And I'm thinking if I follow Baha'í faith, at least is one step helping to rescue this world... and healing this world.'

When a person believes so deeply that they hold a remedy to the social injustices and suffering that exist in the country, it becomes understandable that they would continue to teach their faith openly even at a high risk of persecution. While some of the respondents continued to live openly visible Baha'í lives, the vast majority, however, practiced a less visible form of resistance.

Alternating passing with open displays

Most of the respondents described their religious socialization to be tied closely to choices around safety while maintaining religious constancy. According to the data, before and after the revolution, schools often tolerated Baha'í students as long as they did not speak about their religion. Many of the interviewees learned from their parents to remain quiet and pass as a Muslim student unless they were specifically asked about their religious membership. If they were asked, parents expected their children to state that they were Baha'ís.

³ At the age of fifteen Baha'í youth are no longer considered Baha'í unless officially declare their faith in the religion.

As a result of this socialization, most of the respondents described continuing this pattern of remaining silent unless asked throughout adulthood. After the revolution, due to the increased scrutiny, the interviewees explained that Baha'í communities began holding meetings in secret and only in small groups, in order not to draw attention to any one family that was hosting or attending the gathering. At the same time, children's classes as well as the Baha'í Institute for Higher Education⁴ (an underground university founded by Baha'ís who were professors and professionals) were created in order to provide education and spiritual deepening to the members of the community. These were not allowed under the law but were vital to the survival of the Baha'í community.

Further, these activities of religious and educational preservation served as a form of resistance against the oppression Baha'ís faced in the larger society. Karlberg (2010) provides an analysis of the religious writings of the Baha'í faith as well as statements from the governing body (located in Haifa, Israel). From his analysis he concludes that the religion supports acts of peaceful resistance in order to maintain 'a vibrant community life even under the most arduous conditions' (p. 235).

A few of the interviewees described strategies that they learned from their parents to hide the fact that they were on their way to children's classes. For example, one respondent explained that she would always carry arts and craft supplies with her under the guise of having a crafting class. An explanation for why the continuation of educational activities was so important, despite the risks associated with getting caught, is found in the following narrative by Hamid:

'I think the biggest worry was losing everything that you have. If someone were to come and take your life, your family, and not having a recourse. The fear of not being able to do anything about it. Here, bad things happen, unjust things happen to you. But you always have recourse, you can always take someone to court. You can always complain to somebody that this is not right, what is happening to me. The biggest fear in Iran is that your voice is not being heard, ever. You don't have a voice, you don't have justice. But our children's development, their understanding of the religion and even their education past high school are incredibly important. Otherwise, what will they have?'

Many of the respondents articulated similar perceptions of the importance of Baha'í events and classes to children's development. Most of these parents lived through the revolution where many families lost all of their Baha'í books and writings and as a consequence began memorizing any Baha'í texts that they could locate. Children's classes served as one source of the transmission of the religious knowledge to the next generation.

As a result of alternating passing in public and living Baha'í lives in their homes, many respondents describe leading dual lives or feeling that they had two personalities that they had to manage while living in Iran. Khatereh described this pattern and her own struggles managing her identity when she was younger:

'Having two different personalities and, you know, the one that you are doing it's wrong, but what can you do? You don't want them to come arrest your dad or put you in jail, because the age doesn't matter. They killed a thirteen year old girl, just because she was a Baha'í. So... and you know when you are that young, you are afraid of dying. Later on you might say... Oh, the other world is better. But when you are that young, you don't even know what would happen if you died. You don't understand anything, you just want to be alive, and so you don't say anything. So. I... I... I guess most Baha'ís they have different personalities.'

Many of the interviewees' reported this pattern of vacillating between secrecy in public and practicing their religion in the privacy of their own homes. In her work on Crypto-Jews, Jacobs found that, historically, this community found ways to continue to practice their religion in secret, despite being faced with severe persecution, which caused them to have to hide their Jewish identity in their public lives (2002). My data reveal that many of the Iranian Baha'ís did not stop practicing their faith when it became dangerous to do so. Rather, they found ways to preserve their religious practices and continue to lead Baha'í lives, even if they had to do so in secret.

Adding to the above account, Khatereh further explains that she has heard from relatives and friends who remain in Iran that fewer people are willing to lead a different public and private lives:

'... but nowadays, I guess, Baha'ís they are trying to show their faith publicly... because for how long you can be silent? Now they started saying that, we are Baha'ís there is nothing to be ashamed of. That's a religion and I'm proud of having my religion. But now they are putting more and more in jail and... they thought that by arresting the seven friends of Iran [administrative leaders] they are going to just finish with the whole thing. That no one is going to say they are Baha'ís... because they thought oh these are the leaders, so they are telling them what to do what not to do. But they have been in prison for two years [at the time of the interview] and still Baha'ís they are calling themselves as Baha'í.'

⁴ For a detailed description of this underground university, see Karlberg's 2010 article "Constructive Resilience: The Baha'í Response to Oppression."

The above account illustrates that the Baha'í communities in Iran appear to have grown tired of secrecy after years of oppression and secrecy. It is unclear if this renewed attempt at pushing back against their oppression will lead to any larger societal or governmental changes or if it will lead to increased crack-downs on their communities that will push more individuals back into secrecy.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper I have shown the difficult conditions under which members of the Iranian Baha'í community have had to cope with the impacts of the systematic oppression and persecution they face in their home country. As demonstrated, men and women responded to the persecution of Baha'ís in Iran using one of three strategies: 1) passing as Muslim, 2) religious constancy in the face of danger, and 3) alternating passing with open displays.

The decision of how to respond to or cope with the traumas and human rights violations Baha'ís face is tremendously difficult and painful. When resigning to passing, individuals often face the alienation from their previous community, as well as lacking acceptance as full or trustworthy members of the Muslim community—leaving them virtually alone and without emotional or spiritual support. Those who openly practice their faith, despite the dangers they face, seem to do so with a recognition that they can either be true to their faith and live authentically—being fully aware of the risks—or choose a life of secrecy and alienation. As a consequence, it is not surprising that the majority of interviewees described a constant balancing act between attempting to be as safe as possible, while not denying their faith when directly forced to speak about it—which would be a deep betrayal to their beliefs.

Much of the acts of resistance occur not in those moments of direct danger, but rather through more hidden practices. Throughout their lives, women, men, and children in the Baha'í community in Iran have engaged in a number of acts of resistance. They demonstrate resistance through continued engagement in their religious communities, teaching of their faith when able, and education of their children. Only rarely did members of the Baha'í faith report converting to Islam or choosing a life where they fully pass as Muslim by leaving the religion. More typically, individuals vacillated between passing as Muslims on the street, while living Baha'í lives behind closed doors—never fully being able to live or speak freely.

In an ideal world a large scale study, utilizing a probability sample, would explore how generalizable and common these three strategies are to the wider Baha'í community in Iran. Due to the political situation in Iran and the exploratory nature of the larger project from which this paper emerged, I was only able to access data from people who had fled Iran and not those currently living there. Further, another future direction would be to assess how religious identity and identification might change for this population over their life course.

As described by almost all of the participants in this study and often captured with the phrase “living as a Baha'í in Iran is truly like living as a sheep among wolves in sheep clothing.” These human beings could never fully trust their neighbors or community members, constantly living with the underlying fear of someone exposing them or finding out their true identity. This type of stress has dramatic effects on a person's psychological and physical wellbeing and it is in this context that the members of the Baha'í community in Iran have to navigate their survival and religious practice. They are forced to choose the seemingly safer route of passing as Muslim or to live their true identity openly. It is understandable that so many struggled with the tension between these choices and found themselves wavering between the two dependent on the situation.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Morlock, N. N. (2021). Religious Persecution & Oppression: A Study of Iranian Baha'ís' Strategies of Survival. *Journal of Hate Studies*, 17(2), pp. 15–24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33972/jhs.201>

Published: 06 December 2021

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