



# Middle East Studies Association of North America, Inc.

The University of Arizona • 1643 E. Helen Street • Tucson AZ 85721

27 November 1998

Honorable President Mohamed Khatami  
The Presidency  
Palestine Avenue  
Tehran, Iran

Dear Mr. President:

The Committee on Academic Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa (CAF MENA) would like to express its profound concern about the continued denial of the right to higher education to the Baha'is of Iran.

The Middle East Studies Association comprises 2600 academics worldwide who teach and conduct research on the Middle East and North Africa. The association publishes the respected *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and is committed to ensuring respect for principles of academic freedom and human rights throughout the region.

Since 1980 the Iranian Baha'is have endured widespread discrimination and persecution, to the extent that the community's ability to survive as a faith has been seriously threatened. Individual Baha'is have been subjected to serious and frequent harassment. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, more than 200 leading Baha'is have been executed. In general, continued adherence to the faith has been highly costly, if not life-threatening. To mention only a few examples, according to various U.N. reports since the early 1980s, the conditions for their survival in the private sector were made extremely difficult, when the government confiscated "numerous Baha'i-owned properties" (U.N. A/43/705, p. 14). Many Baha'is told the U.N. Special Representative, Professor Galindo Pohl, "that it had constantly been made clear to them that, if they recanted their faith, all measures against them would cease and they could regain their posts and studies" (U.N. A/42/648, p. 10). Baha'is had to be extremely daring to attempt to circulate any books pertaining to their faith, even among themselves. Obviously no classes could be held for educating children in Baha'i spiritual and moral values (U.N. A/47/617). "Neither Baha'i marriages nor divorces are legally recognized in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Baha'is continue to be deprived of inheritance rights" (U.N. A/47/617). From 1980 to 1988 the conditions for the survival of this minority were horrendous. Since 1988, however, the government has responded to international pressure and somewhat modified its repressive policies, and the Baha'is have gained some breathing space.

We have been disturbed by these intolerable conditions for a long time. In particular, however, we are primarily concerned with academic freedom and the denial of higher education to young Baha'is. We are pleased to note that a change of policy in 1989 allowed Baha'i students to be readmitted to elementary and secondary schools for the first time since the Iranian Revolution. But, as Galindo Pohl noted in 1995, "young Baha'is continue to be denied access to higher education" (U.N. E/CN.4/1995/55). And today, universities remain closed to Baha'i students.

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Baha'i professors have been ousted from Iranian universities, and in the 1980s they were trying, in the words of one U.N. report, "to survive as truck drivers or flower salesmen" (U.N. A/45/697).

It is a testimony to human perseverance that, despite this egregious institutional denial, the Baha'is took the extraordinary step of founding a self-help "university," offering some degree of higher education for their young people. In a climate of intimidation and fear, they managed to establish classes and laboratories in their homes and office buildings. They provided courses in a variety of academic majors, from engineering to English; they offered degrees through correspondence and in classrooms. Some 1000 students benefited. It seems that the dismissed professors had at last found the opportunity to put their hard-earned knowledge and expertise to some valuable use.

We were greatly disturbed by the news that on September 29, 1998 the government security forces raided some 500 private homes and offices, putting an end to these remarkable educational efforts. According to news reports, the authorities initially arrested at least 36 people, although most of them were released after a month in prison. We are concerned about the fate of the four Baha'is who were not set free. From any political or religious angle, the picture appears quite pathetic, in that the state authorities seem to have gone on a rampage, confiscating textbooks and laboratory equipment and arresting academic lecturers and instructors. The security police returned to their headquarters not with "misleading" religious texts, but printed materials on dentistry and physics.

Mr. President, on your recent visit to the United Nations in New York, you once again emphasized the need for an inter-civilizational dialogue. The picture that has been described above suggests a rather inauspicious backdrop for any kind of dialogue. What we wish to request is not a reversal of this latest policy of crackdown, simply allowing the Baha'is to continue their informal educational endeavors by relying on their own meager means. We would like to ask the government to make a fresh start, permitting Baha'i students to enter Iranian institutions of higher education without discrimination or prejudice. In 1988, as we have mentioned, the Islamic Republic reversed its previous policy and allowed Baha'i students to register in state elementary and secondary schools. The earth did not shake, nor did the sky fall. It is difficult to imagine that there would be any adverse results if the same thing is done for higher education. If this is permitted, not only will this beleaguered minority regain more of their basic human rights, but Iran will also benefit as a whole.

Respectfully,



Anne H. Betteridge  
Executive Director

cc: Hossein Mozafar, Minister of Education  
Kamal Kharrazi, Minister of Foreign Affairs