

Changing Tides:

Human Rights, the United Nations and the Bahá'ís in Iran

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Abstract

The situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran has been addressed in academic literature from a range of disciplines including history, political science, international relations, Middle Eastern Studies, anthropology, theology, sociology and law. Each of these lenses highlight different aspects of the persecution of Iran's Bahá'í community.

An examination of the situation through UN documentation, however, brings to the fore the human rights, diplomatic and political aspects of the case. The advantage of utilising UN documentation is that a range of conflicting sources are examined simultaneously and assessed side-by-side: official statements approved by the highest authorities in various capitals, the findings of NGOs, reports by independent experts, state-expert dialogues and laboriously crafted resolutions adopted by vote at the UN's human rights fora.

Whilst there are UN documents examining the human rights situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran before the 1979 revolution, and indeed of Bahá'í communities in other parts of the world, the focus in this paper will be on those relating to Iran from 1979 to the present day. The paper will chart and analyse the changing tides of UN concern with the Bahá'í

situation over the past 29 years – that in turn requiring a consideration of changing contexts whether in terms of emerging human rights standards and mechanisms, the Iranian domestic context or the international context.

The paper will analyse how the various bodies of the UN human rights machinery – whether Charter-Based or Treaty-Based – have given consideration to the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran. How have these findings compared with their observations regarding the broader human rights context in Iran, and particularly of other religious minority groups? How have they compared with the human rights situation of comparable groups in other parts of the world? And, finally, what has been the impact of UN action at various phases of this case – most prominently regarding this case itself, but also its possible broader consequences?

There have been many tides of change over the past 29 years regarding the case of the Bahá'ís in Iran – high tides of alarm and lower tides of optimism by the international community. We will be considering how exactly interactions in the UN have reflected on the situation and how UN bodies have charted the underlying current.

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