



VOA NEWS ON IRAN

Baha'i Group Says Iran Repression Has Increased, Cites 200 Recent Incidents

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Images of two elderly Iranian Baha'i women whose husbands were executed by the Iranian government in the 1980s and whose homes were among those raided by security forces targeting Baha'is in Oct.-Nov. 2023. (Baha'i International Community)

WASHINGTON — Iran has increased repression of its Baha'i minority in recent months by engaging in more than 200 acts of persecution, including the arrests of 19 people last week, the Baha'i International Community, which represents world Baha'is, told VOA on Nov. 13.

Simin Fahandej, a BIC representative to the United Nations, provided her organization's latest assessment of conditions in Iran in this week's edition of VOA's Flashpoint Iran podcast. Her assessment is consistent with an October report of increased harassment of Iran's Baha'is by a U.N. special rapporteur.



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The BIC-alleged incidents include the arrests of 19 Baha'is in Iranian security force raids on Baha'i homes in the cities of Karaj and Hamadan this month, according to a Nov. 10 BIC report.

Iran's state news agency Fars, in a Nov. 8 article, cited a commander of the pro-government Basij militia as saying authorities had arrested 10 members of what Tehran calls the "heretical Baha'i sect" in western Tehran and in Alborz province, of which Karaj is the capital. It did not say when the arrests occurred.

The Fars report accused the Baha'is of being part of an antigovernment propaganda network, a common charge leveled by Iran's Islamist rulers against minority Baha'is peacefully practicing their faith. Baha'is have no religious rights under Iran's Islamist constitution, which only grants such rights to members of three minority faiths, including Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians.

Last month, the U.N. special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Javaid Rehman, told a U.N. meeting in New York that there had been a "marked increase in attacks, targeting and harassment" of Iran's Baha'is.

Rehman said there had been "over 333 reported incidents since July 2022, including cases of arbitrary detentions, interrogations, unlawful arrest, torture, ill treatment, destruction of properties, cemetery desecration, denial of education rights and other forms of economic pressures."

The arrests reported last week drew expressions of concern from Western governments. Rashad Hussain, the U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, tweeted, "Persecution of Baha'is in Iran must end. Religious persecution is unacceptable and the trend of authorities targeting Baha'i women is deeply disturbing."

Canada's Office of Human Rights, Freedoms and Inclusion and Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn posted similar statements on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Iran's U.N. Mission in New York acknowledged having received Friday a VOA request for comment on the Western criticism, but it had not provided one at the time of publication of this report.

The following transcript of Fahandej's VOA interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

VOA: How do you obtain and verify information about arrests of Baha'is in Iran?

Simin Fahandej, BIC representative to the United Nations: It is actually quite difficult to obtain information from a country where individuals have received long sentences for speaking to the media or sharing news on their social media. There is a lot of fear and intimidation that is spread by the Iranian government in order to prevent people from disseminating this type of news. But the information that we do put out is accurate and based on what we receive.

VOA: How did the reported arrests of 19 Baha'is last week compare to other arrests of Baha'is in the first 10 months of this year?

Fahandej: What we have observed is that whenever human rights in Iran generally have deteriorated, the situation of the Baha'is also has deteriorated, unfortunately. We have seen that in the past few months, there has been an escalation in the persecution of the Baha'is. In the past couple of months alone, we have had more than 200 incidents of persecution.

There were these 19 arrests and 20 home raids a few days ago in the cities of Hamadan and Karaj. A couple of weeks ago, we also had dozens of arrests in the cities of Shiraz, Yazd and Isfahan. So we see that actually, there has been this increase in persecution of Baha'is across the country.

Another pattern that we have noticed is that many of the arrested individuals are women. Of the 10 Baha'is arrested in Isfahan, all are women, and most of them are actually young women.

Those arrested in recent weeks include four or five elderly women whose husbands actually had been executed by the Iranian government in the 1980s. So we see that this pattern of persecution essentially affects Baha'is from the moment they are born into their advanced age and even after death. We have seen that Baha'i cemeteries are destroyed and that Baha'is sometimes are not permitted even to visit the resting places of their loved ones.

VOA: BIC has been raising awareness about these cases of persecution through a new report called [The Baha'i Question](#) that was published last month, and through a social media project called [Our Story is One](#). Can you tell us about these projects and what kind of response you have seen?

Fahandej: The Baha'i Question publication actually started a few decades ago. Its name comes from an Iranian government memorandum that also is called The Baha'i Question. This 1991 memorandum was approved by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself. It essentially states that Baha'is should be treated "in a way that their progress and development shall be blocked." And it states a number ways to do this, such as the expulsion of Baha'i students from universities, schools, and places of employment. It also calls for placing Baha'i children in schools with a strong [Islamic] ideology in order to distance them from their faith.

BIC's publications of [The Baha'i Question](#) detail the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran since its 1979 Islamic Revolution up to now, and also detail how international support for Baha'is has really increased over the years.

One example of incredible global support that we have seen for Baha'is is the response to [Our Story is One](#) campaign, which we launched in June in honor of 10 Bahai women executed by Iran 40 years ago.

The campaign has been able to bring Iranians together to see that the hate speech and propaganda spread by the Iranian government for the past 40 years to try to divide the Baha'i community from the rest of Iranian society has not worked. It has helped people to see that the same persecution experienced by Baha'is has extended to Iranians of all backgrounds and faiths, and that we are all one and our story is one.

We actually have seen unprecedented support for the Baha'i community worldwide, with statements of support from Nobel peace laureates, foreign ministers, artists, musicians and countless others.

One feature of the campaign is artwork. We made a public call for works of art, music and dance to celebrate the lives of not just the 10 executed Baha'i women, but of all Iranian women of all backgrounds and faiths. We saw a remarkable display of solidarity through this beautiful artwork and music that we have received.