

PERSECUTION OF BAHÁ'Í IN IRAN

By Matteo Akbarpour

Tucked away in Philadelphia, the Baha'i Center stands as a symbol of the city's cultural diversity and its connection to one of the newest world religions.

The Baha'i faith traces its origins back to Qajar, Iran in 1844 when the Báb, born Mirza Ali Muhammad Shirázi, began spreading word of the Baha'i faith. The Báb proclaimed that "a messenger would soon arrive from God, who would be the latest in a line of prophets including Moses, Muhammad and Jesus Christ," which became a central tenet of the faith.¹ In 1852, one of Báb's persecuted followers had a revelation in prison that he was the prophet the Báb had predicted, calling himself Bahá'u'lláh, a title meaning the Glory of God.

Bahá'u'lláh spent his life as a prophet in a series of exiles to Acre, a city in what is today Israel, where he wrote Kitab-i-Aqdas—one of the key Baha'i scriptures—until his death in 1892. Bahá'u'lláh was succeeded by his son, Abdu'l-Bahá—a title that means servant of Baha—whose missionary work sprouted the growth of sizable Baha'i communities in Europe and North America.² Abdu'l-Bahá also expanded Baha'i ideas of social reform through a series of letters advocating for racial unity, gender equality, universal

education, and the harmony of science and religion. As a result, Baha'i followers are among the first to embrace the then-radical notions of interracial marriage and education for girls.³

Abdu'l-Bahá died in 1921 and was succeeded by his grandson, Shoghi Effendi, who began the construction of Baha'i shrines and gardens on Mount Carmel, a dramatic milestone for the growth of the faith in the Middle East.⁴ After Shoghi Effendi's death in 1957, the leadership of the faith was passed to a group of believers called the Universal House of Justice.⁵

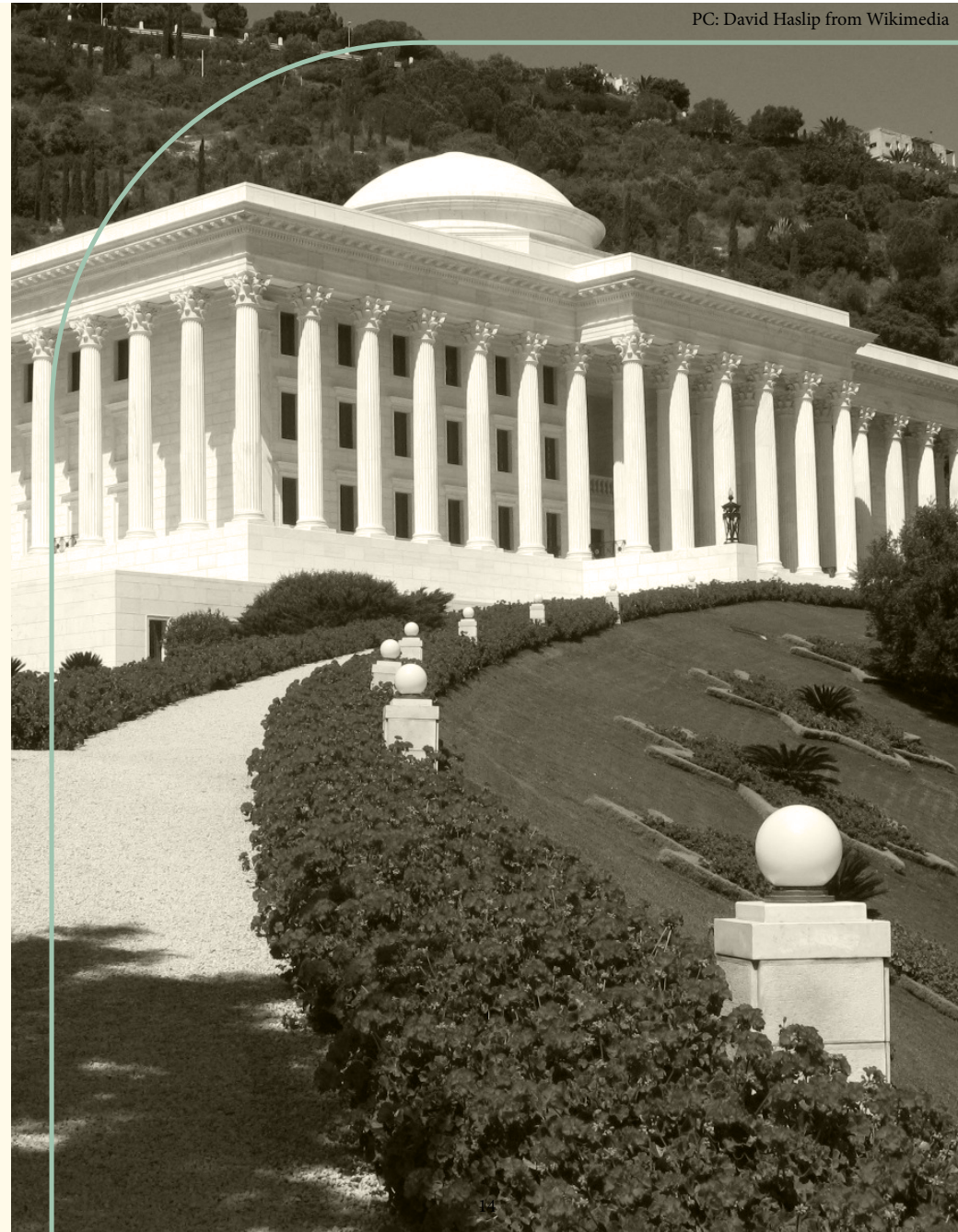
Today, the Baha'i Faith has attracted over eight million followers worldwide.⁶ In Iran, however, its place of origin, puritanical clerics have cracked down on the Baha'i faith with a heavy hand. Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's supreme leader, has called Baha'is "impure" infidels and "enemies" of the Shi'a faith in his fatwahs—legal rulings.⁷ Since 2014, official and semi-official Iranian television channels have published more than 26,000 pieces of anti-Baha'i media to legitimize state-sponsored discrimination. According to a 2020 U.S. Justice Department report, Iranian authorities have banned Baha'i students from enrolling in universities and ha-

ressed those who attended the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, an online university for Baha'is who are denied access to other universities.⁸ Moreover, the Iranian government has been waging a war of economic strangulation against the Baha'is, barring them from holding government jobs while confiscating Baha'i properties to enrich itself.⁹

Shahzard Missaghi, who fled Iran and settled in Philadelphia, reckons that the essence of the Baha'i faith is captured in a quote from the Baha'i writings: "To be a Baha'i simply means to love all the world; to love humanity and try to serve it; to work for universal peace and universal brotherhood."

Shahzard's husband, Babak Shirmohammadi, explains that community service is a major tenet of the Baha'i faith; "The Baha'i Faith provides the means for universal peace through a set of social teachings which are the basis for my actions, for my interactions with others, the importance of awareness of social issues and world issues and understanding that each one of us can be a positive agent of change for the betterment of our community."

Such guiding principles have led to the Baha'i faith's expansion across the Middle East and the globe.



PC: David Haslip from Wikimedia