

The Destruction of the Cultural Sites of the Bahá'ís in Iran

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We would like to provide the following information for the upcoming report by the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a long history of systematically removing the historical and cultural sites of its Bahá'í community. Even prior to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Bahá'í Community had never been allowed to hold property in their own name. This was problematic, as Iran is the birthplace of the Bahá'í Faith, and the place of many historical and memorial sites. In order to maintain the properties for the Bahá'ís of the world, a non-profit holding company was established under the name of Umana or "Trustees". The first act of the Iranian government in 1979 was to confiscate the Umana company, resulting in holding legal possession of all historical and cultural sites belonging to the Bahá'ís. Soon thereafter, numerous Bahá'í religious and cultural monuments were physically seized, desecrated and/or demolished. Further steps were taken to destroy Bahá'í cemeteries in order to erase any historical record of a community. These aggressive tactics have been irrefutably documented and are as follows:

Destruction of Historical and Holy Places

1. The House of the Báb, a place of pilgrimage to Bahá'ís all over the world, was confiscated on 26 April 1979 and destroyed five months later. It was initially confiscated under the guise of "protecting and preventing possible damage." However, it became evident that it was not the case when on 1 September, 1979 a demolition team, commissioned by the Attorney General of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, began to destroy the historic site. Ultimately, the building was razed and the Mosque of Mahdi was built over the site, in an attempt to expunge the historical significance of the home.



The House of the Báb in Shiraz, Iran, one of the most holy sites in the Bahá'í world, was destroyed by Revolutionary Guardsmen in 1979 and later razed by the government

2. Following the 1979 revolution, the Garden of Badasht, where the early believers of the Bahá'í Faith held their first conference in 1848, was demolished.

3. In addition, the Home of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet founder of the Bahá'í faith, in Darkula was demolished in 1979.

4. The House of Bahá'u'lláh in Takur, where the Bahá'í founder spent his youth, was confiscated. In December 1981, it was completely destroyed and the land sold.



5. On 24 July 1979, the holy site known as “the House of the Martyrs” in Arak was destroyed, and the remains of the people buried there were removed by an unknown group.

The grave site of Qaddus, an historic figure of the Bahá'í Faith, during its surreptitious demolition in April 2004. The site is located in Babol, Iran

6. In January 2004, a sacred site in Babul, the resting place of a prominent Bahá'í was destroyed. The destruction was carried out with full cooperation from the authorities, despite the appeals and intervention by local Bahá'ís. The authorities went so far as to prevent the local Bahá'ís from retrieving the sacred remains.

7. In June 2004, despite the historical significance to Iranians in general, the home of Baha'u'llah's father was ordered to be demolished. This site was associated with an important period in the history of the Bahá'í Faith. On the orders of Ayatollah Kani, the demolition was carried out in the presence of the Ayatollah's sons and Intelligence Ministry officials. The Iranian Bahá'ís found out that the mayor's office had received written instructions not to interfere with events pertaining to the building. They also talked to a few reporters, who discovered that the demolition of this house was included in the list of topics about which they were not permitted to report.



Interior of the house of Mirza Abbas Nuri, an architectural landmark in Tehran, during its demolition in June 2004

Cemeteries

Historically, cemeteries have played a significant part of the cultural identity as well as historical meaning for the surrounding living community. Scholars agree that these memorial sites are a means of learning the social constructs of a community. With this point in mind, the Bahá'í community is systematically being deprived of this cultural identity. The desecration and destruction of Bahá'í cemeteries were methodically executed during post-revolutionary Iran as a means to strip the Bahá'ís of their cultural identity and to erase any ties to the community as a whole.

By 2005, the Bahá'í International Community had documented 42 such attacks throughout every region of the country. Cemeteries in Sangsar, Bahnamir, Koshkak, Shahsavar, Babolsar, Manshad, and Chabahr were destroyed. In 1981, the Bahá'í cemetery in Tehran was confiscated and closed, and thirteen cemetery employees were arrested by the orders

of the Central Revolutionary Courts. Ironically, in 1993, the section of the Bahá'í cemetery in Tehran was excavated by bulldozers for the construction of a cultural centre. Approximately 15,000 graves were desecrated as a result of just one of the municipal excavation projects.

The early 2000's brought a new wave of attacks against Bahá'í cultural and historical sites. Below are a few examples of such attacks:



The Bahá'í cemetery in Yazd, Iran, was destroyed in July 2007. The tracks left behind and the severity of the damages show that heavy equipment was used.

1. In February 2005, the Bahá'í cemetery in Yazd was almost completely destroyed. The destruction of the cemetery was not limited to the surface – attackers went so far as to break into the coffins of the deceased. A threatening note was left at one of the homes of the Bahá'ís, stating, “You Bahá'ís take note. Go and see your cemetery...let this be a lesson for you.”

The old Bahá'í cemetery in Yazd, situated in Mahdiabad, was a beautiful flower garden, situated in a vast property in the central area

of the city. This cemetery was destroyed in 1984/1985. Another land was then given to the Bahá'í community in the same year. This piece of land was in a desert area outside the town, close to the ring road and near to the Zoroastrian cemetery. One hundred Bahá'ís have been buried there. Despite its remote position, the Bahá'ís worked hard to make it attractive through planting trees and developed it with much effort. However, in 2013/2014, this cemetery was



Old cemetery of Yazd destroyed in October 1979



Old cemetery of Yazd destroyed in October 1979

also destroyed – the trees were uprooted and one of the Bahá'ís, Mr. Shamim Ettehadi was imprisoned for making a video of the destruction of the cemetery and reporting it to the Manoto television station. An earth embankment a few meters in height was constructed to prevent the Bahá'ís from using it. The families were prevented from going to the cemetery to pray for their loved ones.

Approximately two years ago, after the efforts of some Bahá'ís, a third piece of land was allocated in an inaccessible and barren area for the burial of the deceased

Bahá'ís in Yazd. This land is situated in the middle of the desert, between two sandy hills, where there is no access road and anyone wishing to go there has to pass through the rubbish dump. So far the Bahá'ís have been able to install a small platform with a curtain around it to allow bodies to be prepared for burial. They plan to beautify this third cemetery in due course, in spite of the poor access and the sand storms.

2. The Bahá'í cemetery in Najafabad, which serves five communities¹, was attacked four times in September 2007 and ultimately razed to the ground. On 27 September, the entire cemetery was levelled, leaving no trace of its existence. In the final attack, in November 2007, the provincial Natural Resources Division put up a sign at the site stating, "Possession and burial in this area is subject to legal prosecution." Further



Gravestones in the Bahá'í cemetery near Najafabad, Iran, were left in a heap by a bulldozer that destroyed the burial ground in September 2007

- adding insult to injury in 2009, the graves in the Bahá'í cemetery of Najafabad, were covered over with soil. Families went to the cemetery and uncovered the graves, removing the soil that had been piled on top of them. Subsequently, the former custodians of this cemetery were summoned for questioning. On 21 May 2009, a large sign had been placed alongside the graves, stating: "This cemetery has been transferred to the Municipality pursuant to letter no. 4080 dated 21 January 2009 of the Department of Natural Resources of Najafabad District [which overseas Vilashahr]. Therefore any presumption of ownership or burial on this site is absolutely forbidden and violators will be legally prosecuted pursuant to section 635 of Islamic Penal Law that deals with illegal burial of the dead." Moreover, the local municipality received an order from the Intelligence Ministry, instructing them to refuse to provide ambulance service for Bahá'ís to transport the bodies of the deceased to the cemetery.
3. In November 2007, a grave that had been destroyed two years earlier in the Bahá'í cemetery in Abadeh, and subsequently repaired, was attacked again. The remains were exhumed and crushed under the wheels of a vehicle, with a few bones left beside the grave.
4. In September 2007 in Miyandoab, the remains of a member of the community buried in the Bahá'í cemetery were also exhumed. The Iranian Bahá'ís noted that these distressing incidents demonstrate the depths to which those who perpetrate such acts are willing to descend: not satisfied with vandalizing graves, they are now starting to defile the remains of the deceased.

¹ Amirabad, Goldasht, Najafabad, Vilashahr, and Yazdanshahr.

5. The cemetery in Marvadasht has been repeatedly vandalized. Eyewitnesses have recounted that in August 2007, a member of the clergy entered the Bahá'í cemetery accompanied by three others; they demolished sections of the irrigation system and cut tree branches. The Bahá'ís in Marvadasht contacted the police and the Governor General of the province to request an investigation. It was also reported from Marvadasht that one of the candidates for the Islamic Consultative Assembly said that, if he were elected, he would undertake to demolish the Bahá'í cemetery. In the fall of 2009, the Bahá'í cemetery was vandalized again, and 200 trees were uprooted.
6. The Bahá'í cemetery in Darzikola (a small town near Ghaemshahr in Mazandaran province) was attacked several times. A previous attack on this site had occurred in May 2007. The last few attacks began on 17 October 2008, when a certain number of graves were desecrated. On 23 October, during the early hours of the morning, unknown individuals used at least one bulldozer to cause extensive damage to the cemetery. A report published by the *Human Rights Activists in Iran* estimated that over 80% of the graves had been desecrated. (The report with photos can be found at: http://hraisean.org/Archive_87/1140.html.)

Less than a month later, in mid-November 2008, about 20 people approached the same Bahá'í cemetery with a bulldozer, clearly intending to destroy it, but they were stopped by a group of Bahá'ís who were guarding the cemetery at the time. The Bahá'ís stood in front of the bulldozer and refused to move unless presented with an official demolition order – otherwise, they said, the bulldozer would have to run over them to get in. The driver of the bulldozer was given an order to proceed, but he refused and left, then the group of vandals also scattered. Only a few days later, however, at 4:00 a.m. on 21 November 2008, a group of masked men came back to the cemetery with three front-end loaders. A Bahá'í who lives nearby heard the noise and rushed to stop them, but they tied him up and destroyed the cemetery this time.

As soon as they could, the local Bahá'ís took up the arduous task of sorting through the rubble to match the graves with the headstones. The local Bahá'í community had already begun legal proceedings after the attack in October, and continued to pursue the matter. Meanwhile, on 19 January 2009 at about two in the morning, some officers from the municipality came to the cemetery again. Using a bulldozer with the lights turned off, they razed it completely.

7. On 12 January 2009, government workers entered a cemetery in Tehran and destroyed an entire section known as the burial ground of “infidels”, an area where authorities had buried many of the people executed in the years immediately following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Among the graves were those of a number of Bahá'ís who had been members of the national or local Bahá'í governing bodies (Assemblies), during the years before the Bahá'í sacred institutions were banned by the government. These prominent members of the community were rounded up and killed by government agents during waves of persecution in 1980, 1981 and 1984.

8. The Bahá'í cemetery in Semnan was attacked during the afternoon of 15 February 2009. Some 50 gravestones were demolished and the mortuary (situated at the site) was set on fire. In addition, the attackers wrote graffiti on large steel water drums and tanks near the cemetery. The graffiti included insults degrading the Bahá'í Faith, death threats against "unclean, infidel Bahá'ís" and references to Israel and England.



9. On 12 December 2013, around 9:30 a.m., the Bahá'ís were informed that a group has begun destroying the walls and buildings of the cemetery in Sanandaj. The Bahá'ís immediately went to the property and saw that there were 10 cars belonging to the law enforcement agencies as well as several unmarked cars which apparently belonged to the Intelligence Ministry, and a front-end loader that was in the process of destroying the walls, morgue, prayer room and other areas in the cemetery. They had apparently been present there since 6 a.m. They had also destroyed items in the rooms such as chairs, coffins, and the water heater.

The Semnan Bahá'í cemetery after it was vandalized in February 2009. Approximately 50 gravestones were demolished and the mortuary building was set on fire.



Images of the destruction at the Bahá'í cemetery in Sanandaj, Iran, which occurred on 12 December 2013

It was further reported in June 2015 that the issue of the closure of the Bahá'í cemetery was being pursued through the courts. The lawyer representing the Bahá'ís made the point that municipalities are responsible for assigning land for a cemetery for their citizens, and that no municipality is permitted to provide burial plots to the citizens of another city. Latest reports indicated that the court proceedings had been postponed.

Furthermore, attacks on Bahá'í cemeteries has increased in the past two years – since President Rouhani has taken office. Below are examples of these attacks since 2014:

10. The city of Ahvaz has a Bahá'í cemetery which is 3600 square metres and is adjacent to the Zoroastrian cemetery. Sometime between 6 March and 15 March 2014, the metal door of the Bahá'í cemetery was welded shut and a wall built in front of it, while no attack was made against the Zoroastrian cemetery. The Bahá'í cemetery is in the centre of the city and was built decades ago.
11. In April 2014, Iran's Revolutionary Guards begun excavation in a historically important Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz. The site was, among other things, the resting place of ten Bahá'í women whose cruel hanging in 1983 came to symbolize the government's deadly persecution of Bahá'ís. Truckloads of earth and soil containing the remains of Bahá'í graves were unceremoniously dug up and transported away,

without notice or justification, thereby obviating the possibility for Bahá'ís whose relatives had been buried in the cemetery to seek justice for their deaths, which, in many cases, were directly and demonstrably attributable to the actions of governmental authorities.

Reports received indicated that during the excavation approximately 40 to 50 trucks were present in order to remove the earth and accelerate the work.

Between 1921 and 1922, the Bahá'í cemetery in Shiraz was constructed in an



Some 40 to 50 trucks are lined up to remove the earth and accelerate the work of the destruction of the oldest Bahá'í cemetery located in Shiraz.

For unknown reasons, no land development took place there until the beginning of April 2014. In the western part of the cemetery, however, where the remains had been buried some 100 years ago, excavation across an area of 200 square-metres, and going 1.5 metres deep into the earth, had begun. It is understood that the remains of those who were disinterred from the portion of the cemetery that had been excavated in late April were moved into a nearby trench that was dug to serve as a canal, adjacent to the new building whose construction is now fully underway.



Iranian Revolutionary Guards building a sports and cultural complex over a Bahá'í cemetery. This photo shows concrete being poured into the site where the graves of Bahá'ís were excavated in order to lay the building foundation.

approximately 10,000 square-metre lot. The remains of around 950 people are buried there. In September and October 1983, the cemetery was confiscated by the authorities, the graves were levelled, and its building destroyed. After this confiscation in 1983, its ownership was initially vested in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and was then transferred to the municipality. Three years ago, however, the Revolutionary Guards in the Province of Fars made a public display of their actual possession of the site by installing a sign reading 'Cultural and Sports Centre of the Revolutionary Guards.'



Iranian Revolutionary Guards building a sports and cultural complex over the Bahá'í cemetery. This photo shows concrete being poured into the site where the graves of Bahá'ís were excavated in order to lay the building foundation.

As a result of the widespread condemnation this inhuman act received in the international press, and more specifically among Persian-language media organizations outside Iran, the excavation and construction was temporarily stopped in mid-May 2014. Being fully aware that the redevelopment of these Bahá'í burial lands would resume as media scrutiny of the matter dissipated, the Bahá'ís continued to undertake to resolve the question through repeated appeals to the authorities as a whole, as well as to individual Muslim clerics in particular. From the beginning of the project, the Bahá'ís through numerous visits to the provincial and governor's offices, municipality, city council, environmental agency, office of health, and commander of the Revolutionary Guards have requested that the destruction of the graves and violation of the remains be prevented. Regretfully, these efforts, however tireless, on the part of the Bahá'ís, have not yielded anything close to a permanent resolution and all the organizations have denied responsibility and referred decision-making authority to the headquarters of the provincial Revolutionary Guards. Although some of those who were approached by the Bahá'ís have expressed sympathy for their plight, they nevertheless made it clear that, as the excavation was being executed by the Revolutionary Guards, nothing could be done to permanently halt the process of redevelopment. At a public event at the cemetery in June 2014, held and organized by the authorities to celebrate the redevelopment of the site, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards in Shiraz, responding to the Bahá'í International Community's attempts to raise international awareness of the desecration of the cemetery, stated publicly that the Bahá'ís "have no rightful place" in Iranian society, adding that "the Islamic regime is not going to take note of a foul, unclean, and rootless sect".

In September 2014, the Special Rapporteurs on Iran, freedom of religion or belief as well as minorities publicly appealed to Iran to stop the destruction of the Shiraz cemetery ². Although the project was halted for a few months in light of the international attention it received in the press, the redevelopment began again in August 2014. Furthermore, reports received in August 2015 indicated that construction at the cemetery was continuing speedily. The land was excavated deeply and a few storeys had reportedly been built on the site. The Bahá'ís in Iran have indicated that they regard this as evidence that the Revolutionary Guards are determined to complete the building project regardless of international pressure to recognize the rights of the Bahá'ís to keep this historic site in perpetuity.

12. It was reported in November 2014 that earlier in the month, government agents closed the Bahá'í cemetery in Mahmoudiyeh, near Najafabad, Isfahan, denying the burial of deceased Bahá'ís. The officials have said that the cemetery would be open every Thursday for the Bahá'ís to visit the graves. The Bahá'ís have begun taking legal action in this regard.
13. Sometime in 2015, in the city of Sangsar, the word, "ascension" (passing on) has recently been removed from the tombstones of Bahá'ís with a grinding stone. The

² <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14990&LangID=E>

Bahá'ís have been asked to fill out a form, giving an undertaking to comply with the following with regard to burial in the Bahá'í cemetery:

- Refrain from planting any trees in the cemetery.
- Write only dates of birth and death on the tombstones.
- Refrain from expanding the mortuary and the landscape of the cemetery.

14. During first week of June 2015, a number of unknown individuals cut down the trees in the Bahá'í cemetery in Ghazvin.



Images of the Bahá'í cemetery in Ghazvin.

15. On 21 August 2015, the Bahá'í cemetery in Oroumīyeh was vandalized. Approximately 120 flourishing trees that had been growing there for 15 years were cut down. The Bahá'ís in Oroumīyeh, in groups of fifteen, went to the relevant authorities to seek justice and demand that the action of the trespassers be stopped. This action continued for about two weeks, with groups of Bahá'ís each taking a different approach.

Conclusion

This issue of the destruction of Bahá'í holy places in Iran has been a long standing one. In his visit to Iran in 1995, the then Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Mr. Abdelfattah Amor, had recommended that “the places of worship that have been destroyed should be reconstructed, if possible, or, at least, should form the subject of compensatory measures in favour of the Baha'i community. The Baha'is should also be free to bury and honour their dead.”³

As the Special Rapporteur so poignantly stated in her report to the 31st session of the Human Rights Council, “Cultural heritage is linked to human dignity and identity.” She furthermore added, “Accordingly, all States have an obligation to respect and protect cultural heritage in accordance with international standards, to ensure accountability for acts of intentional destruction of such heritage; and to cooperate to protect cultural heritage.” Not only is the Bahá'í community in Iran being cruelly denied this very right, the

³ E/CN.4/1996/95/Add.2

Bahá'ís of the world who recognize these sites as part of their collective history are also being deprived of the possibility of keeping a historical record of their community. How are they to transmit their cultural heritage to future generations, when the government of Iran has instituted a campaign to erase the Bahá'í community from its national history? It is therefore essential that such practices be exposed, so that the government of Iran may be prevented from initiating further destruction of memorials and historical monuments of its Bahá'í community.