



## THE BLOG

# Where Does a Canadian Degree Get You in Iran? In Prison

🕒 01/18/2012 04:10 EST | **Updated** 03/19/2012 05:12 EDT



**Irwin Cotler**

Chair of Raoul Wallenberg Human Rights  
Centre, Former Minister of Justice/Attorney  
General of Canada



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In the latest of a long list of crimes perpetrated against the Iranian Baha'i community by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's regime, several graduates of Canadian universities have been [detained](#) and imprisoned for their involvement with the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education.

Nooshim Khadem -- who holds a Masters in Business from Carleton University -- was sentenced to four years in prison, while Kamran Rahimian and Faran Hesami -- who

carry Masters in Educational Counseling from the University of Ottawa -- have been detained without charge since September 13.

Indeed, the arrest of these educators underscores the arbitrary persecution and prejudicial treatment inflicted upon the Baha'i in Iran.

Just this summer, several Iranian Baha'i leaders re-sentenced on charges of "insulting religious sanctities," "propaganda against the system" and "espionage for Israel" -- charges without foundation, reminiscent of the soviet tactic "Give us the people and we will find the crime." Their reinstated 20-year sentences now constitute a death sentence given their advanced age. Despite repeated requests from both the defendants and their attorneys, neither official copies of the original verdict nor the ruling on appeal have been disclosed.

Indeed, the plight of the Baha'i in Iran offers a looking-glass into the plight of human rights in Iran in general, and the criminalization of innocence -- the targeting of Iran's largest religious minority -- in particular. While the world is focused on Iran's nuclear pursuits, the massive domestic repression in Iran -- as exemplified in the oppression of the Baha'i -- should be a no less compelling concern and call to action.

Simply put, the persecution and prosecution of these Baha'i is a case-study of the systematic if not systemic character of Iranian injustice, including: arbitrary arrest and incommunicado detention; false and trumped-up charges such as "spreading corruption on Earth" and "espionage for foreign elements;" coerced confessions; denial of the right to effective counsel; and show trials devoid of any due process before a politicized judiciary.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Baha'is -- seen as heretical apostates who have betrayed Islam -- have faced a state-orchestrated campaign of religious persecution and prosecution in their Iranian homeland. Indeed, more than 200 Baha'is have been executed since the early 1980s.

In the early 1990s, the Iranian government intensified the systematic deprivation of the Baha'is' social, economic, and cultural rights, depriving the Baha'i of their livelihood while destroying their religious and cultural heritage. Simply put, the Iranian leadership sought to disenfranchise the Baha'i from participation in all aspects of Iranian life. Since the fraudulent Iranian elections of 2009, these assaults have only escalated.

The most [recent report](#) of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran highlights the increasingly prejudicial treatment facing Baha'is under the current

regime, citing the denial of jobs, pensions, and educational opportunities -- as well as the arbitrary confiscation and destruction of property.

President Ahmadinejad's campaign of hatred and incitement has also included: the singling out of the Baha'i for special opprobrium and repression; the use of state media to dehumanize and demonize the Baha'i in the eyes of their fellow Iranians; the harassment of Baha'i children; the proliferation of assaults on members of the community; as well as the orchestration of militia and hate groups to intimidate and silence them.

This upsurge has alarmed human rights scholars and monitors who fear not only for the Baha'i community so targeted, but also that such attacks portend something worse. Senator Romeo Dallaire -- a member of the United Nation's Secretary General's Advisory Committee on Genocide Prevention and former Force Commander for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) -- observed in the Canadian Parliament that "there is no clearer example of a nation leading its way into a potential genocide scenario."

The question remains: What can be done about the plight of the Baha'i and its leadership, which is but a case study of the massive domestic repression in Iran?

The recent round of sanctions from the United States, England, and Canada are welcome; but the primary focus of these sanctions on the nuclear threat overlooks and marginalizes the human rights situation while running the risk of undercutting the case for the sanctions themselves.

While the international community has condemned the assaults perpetrated against the Baha'i leadership -- and Canada has co-sponsored the annual UN General Assembly Resolution condemning the regime's ongoing abuses -- it must also hold the human rights violators to account.

This requires sanctioning of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps -- the organization at the epicentre of Iranian repression and murder -- lest the culture of impunity continue. Further, we must name and sanction the human rights violators especially responsible for the repression of the Baha'i minority through travel bans, asset seizures, and prohibitions on any dealings with them. Indeed, we must raise the plight of the Baha'i in any and all bilateral and international fora as a demonstrable case for Iranian accountability -- and call for the release of the seven imprisoned Baha'i leaders and their community educators -- together with the cessation of the escalating assaults upon the Baha'i population.

the international community must hold Iran accountable for its ongoing criminalization of innocence and its state-sanctioned incitement to hate.

Irwin Cotler is a Member of Parliament and the former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada. He is a Professor of Law (Emeritus) at McGill University and chairs the Responsibility to Prevent Coalition, an international legal consortium seeking to hold Ahmadinejad's Iran to account.

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