



# THE BAHA'IS IN YEMEN: FROM OBSCURITY TO PERSECUTION AND EXILE

By

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COVER PHOTO: Bani Mater, a district some 30 kilometers west of Sana'a, is among the areas in Yemen with a Baha'i presence. Picture here on August ,14 2013 // Photo Credit: Bu Madyan al-Abbasi via Flickr



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Baha'i religion is relatively new to Yemen, reaching the coastal regions and Yemeni islands in the mid-19th century. The estimated 2,000 Baha'i adherents in Yemen today<sup>[1]</sup> constitute a religious minority that has come under increasing threat since the armed Houthi movement overtook the capital in late 2014 and the Saudi-led regional military intervention began the following spring. The pattern of Baha'i persecution in Houthi-controlled areas is remarkably similar to that seen in Iran, where Baha'is have been systematically targeted, according to a UN expert on freedom of religion.<sup>[2]</sup>

Since 2016, dozens of Yemeni Baha'is have been arrested on spurious charges, imprisoned and denied due process during years-long court trials that have, in some cases, resulted in the death penalty. During raids on Baha'i homes and NGOs, Houthi forces have seized phones, property and passports and have subsequently pressured relatives and friends to pay for the prisoners' release.<sup>[3]</sup>

The systematic persecution of Baha'is in Houthi-controlled areas is worrying, given that the religious minority is concentrated in these areas. But while the Houthis represent the most significant threat to Baha'is in Yemen, they are not the only one. That the religion's roots are in Iran and that its headquarters, established in historical Palestine, continues to operate in modern-day Israel has generated suspicion among religious extremists and political groups, which have sought to justify the persecution of the Baha'i on the grounds of these connections.

After a brief look at the history, beliefs and philosophy of the Baha'i faith, this report examines the workings of Yemen's Baha'i community and how this community fits into Yemen's religious, social and political fabric. Prior to the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, the adherents of the religion had a relatively peaceful

1) Nasser al-Sakkaf, "Yemen's Baha'i community growing despite persecution," October 17, 2016, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemens-bahai-community-growing-despite-persecution>; Several difficulties arise in determining an accurate estimate of the current population of Baha'is in Yemen, including the absence of any official census figures about the group and the current reluctance of Baha'is to state their religious affiliation.

2) "Yemen must stop persecution of Baha'i community, urges UN expert on freedom of religion," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, May 22, 2017, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21643&LangID=E>

3) "Freedom of religion: UN expert urges Yemen to halt systematic harassment of Baha'i community," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, October 4, 2016, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20635&LangID=E>

relationship with Yemeni authorities and other religious groups. The uprisings – of which the Yemeni revolution was a part – and their aftermath set in motion a reorganization of Yemen's political landscape.

The imprisonment of prominent Baha'i figure Hamed bin Haydara in late 2013 exemplified the emerging pattern of persecution the group faced. This persecution became systematic following the Houthi movement's rise to power less than a year later. The final sections of this report examine the impact of the war on Baha'i communities throughout Yemen.



## THE BAHÁ'I FAITH

The Baha'i religion is among the youngest in the world. It emerged in the cultural and philosophical context of Shia Islam, in mid-19th century Persia (modern-day Iran).<sup>[4]</sup> However, its holiest sites and administrative center are now in Israel. Both countries remain central to the religion, but Baha'i adherents can be found across the globe.

### Origins and History

In Shiraz in 1844, 25-year-old merchant Sayyid Ali-Mohammed Shirazi adopted the title of “the Bab”, which means “gate” or “door” in Arabic, and announced a new religion – one that sought to prepare its followers for the coming of a divine messenger known as Baha'u'llah, meaning “the Glory of God.” Many of the Bab's earliest followers were prominent Shia Muslims, but the new religion – known as the Babi faith – advocated for a freestanding system of beliefs and values.

While its adherents recognized and respected Islam and its prophet Mohammed, the new faith threatened core beliefs of Shia Islam.<sup>[5]</sup> The Bab, controversially, advocated for the abolishment of the clerical hierarchy that characterized Twelver Shiism. He claimed to have direct contact with the Hidden Imam – the 12th imam central to Twelver Shiism, whose highly anticipated return after being in hiding for nearly a thousand years was expected to usher in an era of peace and justice – and eventually claimed that he was the Hidden Imam.

These claims, made during a period when there were particularly high expectations of the Hidden Imam's imminent return, posed a threat to the religious and political status quo. To prevent the Bab from fomenting societal upheavals, Persian authorities ordered his execution by firing squad, which was carried out in Tabriz, in 1850.<sup>[6]</sup>

4) Ismael Velasco, “A Prolegomenon to the Study of Babi and Baha'i Scriptures: The Importance of Henry Corbin to Babi and Baha'i Studies,” *Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol. 12 (2004), [https://bahai-library.com/velasco\\_importance\\_henry\\_corbin](https://bahai-library.com/velasco_importance_henry_corbin)

5) Todd Lawson, “Baha'i Religious History: Introduction,” *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 2012), [https://bahai-library.com/lawson\\_bahai\\_religious\\_history](https://bahai-library.com/lawson_bahai_religious_history)

6) Moojan Momen, “The Social Basis of the Babi Upheavals in Iran (1848-53): A Preliminary Analysis,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2 (May 1983), pp. 157-183.

Mirza Husayn-Ali Nuri, a wealthy Tehrani nobleman and a follower of the Bab, picked up where the Bab had left off and continued spreading the Babi faith. As a result, Nuri was imprisoned for several years. He was released and sent into exile, along with his family, to Baghdad. There, in 1863, he declared that he was the messenger of God whose arrival the Bab had prophesied. Nuri adopted the title Baha'u'llah, after which the Baha'i faith is named. Despite the name change, the Baha'i faith was essentially a continuation of the Babi faith. Over the next few years, many adherents of the Babi faith became Baha'is, accepting Baha'u'llah not only as the messianic figure foretold by the Bab, but the “promised one of all ages” prophesied in many holy texts, including the Quran and the Bible.<sup>[7]</sup>

Baha'u'llah and his family were exiled by Persian authorities for a second and third time in quick succession, first to Ottoman-controlled Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) and then to the nearby city of Adrianople (modern-day Edirne). In 1868, Baha'u'llah was exiled for the fourth and last time, to Acre, Palestine, where he was imprisoned again. When he died, in 1892, Baha'u'llah was buried in a shrine that remains the faith's holiest site and the primary destination of Baha'i pilgrims.<sup>[8]</sup>

Before his death, Baha'u'llah appointed his oldest son, Abdul-Baha (1844-1921), as the next leader of the faith. Like his father, Abdul-Baha, whose name means “the Servant of the Glory”, was imprisoned for much of his life. From 1911-13, after a stint in prison in Acre that ended in 1908, Abdul-Baha toured Europe and North America to spread the faith. Rather than being considered a messenger of God, like his father and the Bab, Abdul-Baha was seen as the perfect example of how Baha'is should act.<sup>[9]</sup> His grandson Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) led the Baha'is from 1921 until his death. Since 1963, the Universal House of Justice, a nine-member elected body based in Haifa, has led the religion.

The number of Baha'i adherents grew exponentially in the aftermath of the world wars of the 20th century, as globalization increased.<sup>[10]</sup> At the same time, the Baha'i population in Iran, where the religion originated, faced repression. During the first 15 years or so of Mohammad Reza Shah's reign (1941-1979), Baha'is were

7) Abdul-Baha, “A Traveller's Narrative”, translated by E.G. Browne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891), <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/travelers-narrative/1#728186432>

8) Juan Cole, “Baha'u'llah,” The Baha'i Encyclopedia, 1995, [https://bahai-library.com/cole\\_encyclopedia\\_bahauallah](https://bahai-library.com/cole_encyclopedia_bahauallah)

9) “Abdul-Baha – The Perfect Exemplar,” Bahai.org, accessed February 4, 2021, <https://www.bahai.org/abdul-baha/>

10) “Selected Baha'i statistics,” Encyclopedia Iranica, accessed February 8, 2021, [https://iranicaonline.org/articles/bahaism-iv#prettyPhoto\[sidebar\]/0/](https://iranicaonline.org/articles/bahaism-iv#prettyPhoto[sidebar]/0/)

marginalized by the government, clergy and wider population. This tumultuous and at times bloody period for the religion gave way to two decades of relative calm, during which Baha'is enjoyed fewer physical attacks but were nonetheless denied official recognition by the state.<sup>[11]</sup>

Toward the end of Reza Shah's reign, in the years leading up to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini stigmatized the Baha'is as outsiders, encouraging their persecution.<sup>[12]</sup> After the revolution, with Khomeini instituted as supreme leader of the new Islamic republic, rhetoric and actions against the Baha'i grew more punitive. Between 1978 and 1998, approximately 200 Baha'is were executed in Iran.<sup>[13]</sup>

In 1993, the UN Commission on Human Rights discovered a confidential Iranian circular<sup>[14]</sup> outlining that government's systematic persecution of Baha'is.<sup>[15]</sup> Prepared at the request of current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (Khomeini's successor), the circular recommends a comprehensive policy to block the progress and development of Baha'is in the country. The memo also recommends developing a plan "to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the country."<sup>[16]</sup>

According to Bani Dugal, principal Baha'i representative to the UN in New York, many Baha'is in Yemen fear this proposed policy might be the basis for their persecution at the hands of the Houthi authorities.<sup>[17]</sup> While there is no concrete evidence that Iran is driving the Houthi persecution of the religious minority in Yemen, the language used by Khomeini, Khamenei and the Houthis depicting Baha'is as Zionists, agents of imperialism and Jews is strikingly similar.<sup>[18]</sup>

11) Mina Yazdani, "Towards a History of Iran's Baha'i Community During the Reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, 1941-1979," *Iran Namag*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 2017), 66-93.

12) *Ibid.*

13) David P. Forsythe, "Encyclopedia of Human Rights" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

14) "The ISRCC document," UN Human Rights Office, February 25, 1991, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/IRN/INT\\_CRC\\_NGO\\_IRN\\_19737\\_A.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/IRN/INT_CRC_NGO_IRN_19737_A.pdf)

15) Reynaldo Galindo Pohl, "Final report on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran by the Special Representative of the Commission on Human Rights," UN Commission on Human Rights, January 28, 1993, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/159375?ln=en>

16) "The ISRCC document," UN Human Rights Office, February 25, 1991, [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/IRN/INT\\_CRC\\_NGO\\_IRN\\_19737\\_A.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/IRN/INT_CRC_NGO_IRN_19737_A.pdf)

17) Bani Dugal, principal Baha'i representative to the UN in New York, video interview, October 29, 2020.

18) Mina Yazdani, "The Islamic Revolution's Internal Other: The Case of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Baha'is of Iran," *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 2012), [https://www.academia.edu/9405045/The\\_Islamic\\_Revolution\\_s\\_Internal\\_Other\\_The\\_Case\\_of\\_Ayatollah\\_Khomeini\\_and\\_the\\_Baha\\_is\\_of\\_Iran](https://www.academia.edu/9405045/The_Islamic_Revolution_s_Internal_Other_The_Case_of_Ayatollah_Khomeini_and_the_Baha_is_of_Iran); Mina Yazdani, "The Confessions of Dolgoruki: Fiction and Masternarrative in Twentieth-Century Iran," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1 (January 2011), [https://www.academia.edu/7019702/Confessions\\_of\\_Dolgoruki\\_IS\\_44\\_Jan11](https://www.academia.edu/7019702/Confessions_of_Dolgoruki_IS_44_Jan11)



## Global Baha'i Community

Estimates of the current size of the global Baha'i community vary widely, from 5 million to over 7 million. Given the difficulties of accurately assessing the size of religious membership and the divergent methodologies used to do so, such figures should be considered rough approximations.<sup>[19]</sup> While the number of Baha'i adherents pales in comparison to the membership of religions like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism, the Baha'i faith is extremely widespread, with followers present in 188 countries.<sup>[20]</sup> India is home to the largest Baha'i community, which is estimated to encompass between 1.7 and 2.3 million followers.<sup>[21]</sup>

The religion's spiritual and administrative center, known as the Baha'i World Centre, is located near Mount Carmel in the city of Haifa, in modern-day Israel. The founders of the faith are both buried in Israel: the shrine of the Bab is in Haifa, while Baha'u'llah is buried further north, on the outskirts of Acre. The latter's burial complex is the holiest site of the Baha'i faith and the point toward which Baha'is face during prayer. Baha'is are encouraged to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of Baha'u'llah at least once in their lifetime.

## Calendar, Beliefs and Organization

The Baha'i calendar begins in 1844, when the Bab announced a new faith and the coming of a messenger. The calendar has 19 months, each with 19 days. On the first day of each month, the community gathers for what is known as the Nineteen Day Feast. In the last month of the year, starting in early March, Baha'is fast for 19 days. Aside from the Baha'i New Year – celebrated on March 21, which coincides with Nowruz, the Iranian or Persian New Year – the Baha'is celebrate nine work-free holy days associated with the lives of the Bab, Baha'u'llah and Abdul-Baha.<sup>[22]</sup>

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19) "Number of Baha'is by country," Bahaipedia, accessed November 28, 2020, [https://bahaipedia.org/Number\\_of\\_Bah%C3%A1%E2%80%99%C3%ADs\\_by\\_country](https://bahaipedia.org/Number_of_Bah%C3%A1%E2%80%99%C3%ADs_by_country)

20) "Baha'i: Worldwide Expansion," The Pluralism Project, Harvard University, accessed December 9, 2020, [https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/pluralism/files/worldwide\\_expansion\\_0.pdf](https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/pluralism/files/worldwide_expansion_0.pdf); "Statistics," Baha'i World News Service, accessed December 21, 2020, <https://news.bahai.org/media-information/statistics/>

21) "Number of Baha'is by country," Bahaipedia, accessed November 28, 2020, [https://bahaipedia.org/Number\\_of\\_Bah%C3%A1%E2%80%99%C3%ADs\\_by\\_country](https://bahaipedia.org/Number_of_Bah%C3%A1%E2%80%99%C3%ADs_by_country)

22) John E. Esslemont, "Baha'u'llah and the New Era: An Introduction to the Bahá'í Faith", (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing, 2006).

Bahá'is believe in the oneness of God, all religions and humanity, based on the idea that there is one God, who reveals his teachings through various messengers, including Mohammed, Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, the Bab and Baha'u'llah. While these messengers lived in different cultural contexts, Bahá'is believe that the spiritual laws they promulgated derive from the same source.<sup>[23]</sup>

The faith adopted various Islamic elements, including Shia messianic beliefs, Quranic quotation, abstinence from alcohol and an annual period of fasting.<sup>[24]</sup> The Bahá'i belief that the Hidden Imam's reappearance in 1844 marked the start of a new era in which the human race would mature spiritually aligns with the Islamic mystical doctrine of the Perfect Man or Perfect Humanity, as theorized by the mystic philosopher Muhyiddin ibn al-'Arabi, known as "Ibn Arabi".<sup>[25]</sup> According to the Bahá'i theory, divine messengers will continue to appear in order to teach humanity how to carry on what Baha'u'llah called an ever-advancing civilization. However, the next messenger of God is not expected to appear before 1,000 years have passed.<sup>[26]</sup>

A significant portion of Bahá'i scripture comes from Baha'u'llah, who wrote prolifically in Arabic and Farsi.<sup>[27]</sup> The faith's central text is called the Kitab-i-Aqdas, or "the most holy book".<sup>[28]</sup> Baha'u'llah's writings portray humanity as progressing toward peace, justice and unity. Core principles espoused in the Bahá'i texts include: the oneness of humanity, abandonment of prejudices, universal peace, universal education and curriculum, harmony of religion and science, the oneness of the foundation of all religions, and equality of men and women.<sup>[29]</sup> Homosexuality, however, is not permitted in the religion.<sup>[30]</sup> Bahá'i

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23) Abdul-Baha, "Foundations of World Unity" (Project Gutenberg, September 2006), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19238/19238-h/19238-h.html>

24) Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shiism to World Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

25) Todd Lawson, "Bahá'i Religious History: Introduction," *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 2012), [https://bahai-library.com/lawson\\_bahai\\_religious\\_history](https://bahai-library.com/lawson_bahai_religious_history)

26) Ibid.

27) Moojan Momen, "Bahá'i sacred texts," British Library, September 23, 2019, <https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/bahai-sacred-texts#>

28) Todd Lawson, "The Kitab-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book by Baha'u'llah," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1/2 (winter/spring, 1996), 207-209, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4310986>

29) Peter Terry, "Abdul-Baha's Explanation of the Teachings of Baha'u'llah Tablets and Talks Translated into English (1911-1920)," *Lights of Irfan*, Book 1 (Wilmette: Irfan Colloquia, 2000), 143-163, [https://bahai-library.com/terry\\_explanation\\_teachings\\_bahaullah](https://bahai-library.com/terry_explanation_teachings_bahaullah)

30) Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi & Universal House of Justice, "Homosexuality," compiled by Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, 1993, [https://bahai-library.com/compilation\\_homosexuality\\_bwc](https://bahai-library.com/compilation_homosexuality_bwc)

teachings stipulate that if a family only has the means to educate one child, it should be the girl, because her maternal role positions her as the main educator of the next generation.<sup>[31]</sup>

Baha'i communities are organized and led by elected councils at the local, national and international levels, although they are not political in nature in line with the religion's principle of non-interference in partisan politics.<sup>[32]</sup> On the local level, nine-member "local spiritual assemblies" are elected each year. These local assemblies select members to represent them at the national level. Every five years, members of the "national spiritual assemblies" convene at the Baha'i World Center in order to hold elections to determine the make-up of the faith's highest governing authority, the Universal House of Justice.<sup>[33]</sup>

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31) Todd Lawson, "Baha'i Religious History: Introduction," *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 2012), [https://bahai-library.com/lawson\\_bahai\\_religious\\_history](https://bahai-library.com/lawson_bahai_religious_history)

32) Shoghi Effendi, "The Non-Political Character of the Bahá'í Faith: Excerpts from the Writings of Shoghi Effendi," *Bahá'í World*, vol. 18 (1979-1983), [https://bahai-library.com/shoghieffendi\\_non\\_political\\_character](https://bahai-library.com/shoghieffendi_non_political_character)

33) Baha'u'llah, Abdul-Baha and Shoghi Effendi, "Principles of Baha'i Administration" (London: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1973).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report aims to explore an understudied and little understood community: the Baha'is of Yemen. The current conflict in Yemen has had a deleterious effect on the status and security of the Baha'is, making access to the community a potentially risky matter on the research participants and the research team. The research team treaded carefully, after assessing that the potential risk associated with putting the community under the spotlight of a published report was outweighed by the benefits of highlighting their heightened vulnerabilities under the current war and bringing this issue to the attention of national and international policy makers. This particular issue was discussed with the research participants who accepted this assessment.

This report uses qualitative research methods. A desk review of available literature about Baha'is in Yemen reveals that the vast majority of information about the community has been published in the last decade, in the form of news stories, press releases by Baha'i organizations and international NGO reports. There are few research reports on this religious minority in Yemen. Most of the coverage of the community focuses on the persecution the group has faced amid the societal upheaval that followed the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. Thus, the absence of substantive studies and experts on this subject meant that there was little available research to build-on. This proved to be one of the main limitations of the research.

Primary data comprised of interviews with Baha'is in Yemen and in exile as well as interviews with human rights activists and an online focus group with Baha'is in Yemen. These interviews brought to light the community's experience of persecution and its sense of diminished safety to practice freely or even to continue identifying openly as Baha'is under the current conditions - particularly in the Houthi-controlled areas. Where possible, the material gathered in these interviews was supplemented by information from the available literature.

A series of structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted via video call with 11 Baha'is in their communities in Yemen between November 2020 and February 2021. These interviewees included two elderly Baha'is, five women in their 20s and 30s, two men in their 20s and two representatives of Baha'i institutions (assemblies). An additional six Baha'is in Yemen took part in a group interview. This group was composed of three women and three men, ranging in age from 27 to 40. They came from across the country: two from Taiz

governorate, two from Sana'a governorate and one each from Hadramawt and Aden governorates. The Baha'is interviewed in Yemen were thus able to represent a diversity of perspectives, based on region, age and gender.

Interviewing individuals from a threatened community entails ethical and methodological challenges. The research team had to carefully navigate access to the community and take the needed time to gain the trust of research participants. This was anticipated in the research design stage and the research team included a researcher who is a well-respected and trusted figure from the community. This researcher proved integral to ease the security concerns of the research participants as well as provide an insider perspective of the community, its practices, challenges and coping mechanisms in the face of persecution and threat.

The structured interviews with Baha'is in Yemen along with the focus group were conducted by the researcher from the Baha'i community and the questions were prepared by the research lead. Summaries notes and some recordings were shared with the research lead for quality assurance. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the research lead with five Yemeni Bahai's who are currently residing outside of Yemen, including two who were recently exiled to Europe. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with Baha'i representatives at the United Nations and two human rights activists who have worked with Baha'i communities in Yemen and a lawyer at Yemen-based human rights NGO. Attempts to contact Houthi representatives to inquire about court trials against Baha'is and other allegations of persecution were declined. According to some of the interviewees, this is partly because Houthi authorities do not document many of the actions taken against Baha'is, including the confiscation of money and property. In the course of this research, however, some court records documenting judicial actions taken against the Baha'is were made available through members of the Baha'i community and NGOs. Most of the interviews were recorded; for those that were not, extensive notes were taken.



## INSIDE YEMEN'S BAHÁ'I COMMUNITY

According to the Baha'i narrative, followers of the religion have lived in Yemen since 1844, when the Bab passed through the port city of Mokha, on Yemen's Red Sea Coast, during a trip from Iran to Mecca to spread the message of the faith. During his stopover, the Bab spread his teachings to local Yemenis. Mokha subsequently became a regular staging post for Baha'is making pilgrimages from Asia to Haifa, and the city's Baha'i community grew.<sup>[34]</sup>

After World War II, a wave of Baha'i migrants settled in southern Yemen, particularly around the port of Aden, which was then the third-busiest port in the world, attracting a diverse array of people.<sup>[35]</sup> Following the establishment of the communist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) in the late 1960s, and the subsequent nationalization of property under the Socialist Party, many Baha'is left the Aden area. They travelled to other countries or resettled in the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen), which had formed in 1962.<sup>[36]</sup> An 85-year-old Baha'i woman told the Sana'a Center that she moved with her family from Aden to what is today Hudaydah governorate due to the changes under the communist regime.<sup>[37]</sup>

In this way, Baha'i adherents became more widely spread throughout Yemen in the late 20th century. However, some Baha'is did remain in Aden, including the family of Nadim Sakkaḥ.<sup>[38]</sup> (Sakkaḥ is a Yemeni Baha'i who is living outside the country, having been accused by Houthi authorities of espionage. He was interviewed for this report.)

Over the past two decades, the Baha'i community in Yemen has grown with the help of communications technologies, according to Sakkaḥ. Some of the Yemenis who joined the faith during this period first learned about it on the Internet.<sup>[39]</sup> This latest generation of Baha'is in Yemen grew up as Yemeni citizens and were thus

34) Mohammed al-Mahfali and Eman Homaïd, "Minorities in Yemen: Realities and Challenges," translated by Ibrahim Nagib, Insaf Organization, 2019, retrieved December 1, 2020, [https://insaf-ye.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/English\\_Book-1.pdf](https://insaf-ye.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/English_Book-1.pdf)

35) Tim Alamenciak, "A brief history of Yemen," Toronto Star, May 12, 2012, [https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2012/05/12/a\\_brief\\_history\\_of\\_yemen.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2012/05/12/a_brief_history_of_yemen.html)

36) Ibid.

37) Anonymous Baha'i woman, online interview by Baha'i researcher, November 25, 2020.

38) Nadim Sakkaḥ, online interview by research team, November 28, 2020.

39) Ibid.

more integrated within Yemeni society than were previous Baha'i generations. This has allowed them to more easily communicate their beliefs to friends in the general population.<sup>[40]</sup>

The ongoing war in Yemen has reportedly also played a role in driving people to the Baha'i faith. The widely publicized oppression of Baha'is in Houthi-controlled areas has led Yemenis to take an interest in the religion for the first time, according to prominent Baha'i Waleed Ayash. The Baha'i faith's focus on peace and its rejection of all forms of conflict have attracted a new wave of devotees. Ayash himself was drawn to the faith on these grounds.<sup>[41]</sup>

## Baha'i Institutions and Social Services

Over the course of the current persecution Baha'is in Yemen have halted their gatherings and activities. Usually, community gatherings and structures help unify and organize Baha'i adherents' lives. According to custom, local Baha'i communities gather every 19 days in one of the adherent's homes. The biggest gathering is held during Eid al-Ridvan,<sup>[42]</sup> in April, when annual elections are typically held for the local spiritual assemblies. Each local assembly consists of nine adults; they represent the community and deal with their matters.

In Yemen, several local spiritual assemblies and the National Spiritual Assembly coordinate and organize the work of various Baha'i NGOs in the country, according to Sakka, who is a member of the national body. The earliest recorded local assemblies in Yemen occurred in Sana'a, in 1961, and Aden, in 1962, according to Yemeni Baha'i spokesman Abdullah al-Olofi. It is likely, Al-Olofi said, that the assemblies were established earlier than this, in the 1950s.<sup>[43]</sup> The first and only national assembly in Yemen was founded in Sana'a, in 1984.<sup>[44]</sup> All local assemblies in Yemen have gathered under this one national assembly, in spite of the political divisions in the country.

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40) Anonymous Baha'i man, online interview by Baha'i researcher, November 28, 2020.

41) Waleed Ayash, online interview by research team, October 25, 2020.

42) Known as the most holy Baha'i festival, Eid al-Ridvan lasts for 12 days, at the end of April and beginning of May. Baha'i communities around the world celebrate the anniversary of the days Baha'u'llah spent with followers along the Tigris River in Baghdad after announcing that he was God's messenger. Baha'u'llah called the garden in which this party gathered "Ridvan", meaning "paradise". See: "Festival of Ridvan celebrated around the world," Baha'i News World Service, May 7, 2017, <https://news.bahai.org/story/1166/>

43) Abdullah al-Olofi, online interview by research team, February 1, 2021.

44) See: "First NSA of Yemen, 1984," Baha'i Media, retrieved February 2, 2021, [https://bahai.media/File:First\\_NSA\\_of\\_Yemen,\\_1984.png](https://bahai.media/File:First_NSA_of_Yemen,_1984.png)

Elections to the membership of Baha'i institutions occur by secret ballot (but openly campaigning for election is not permitted). As such, Baha'i elections are "devoid of any system of nomination, electioneering, canvassing or propaganda."<sup>[45]</sup> Serving, if elected, as a member of Baha'i institutions is considered a spiritual duty that should not be refused.<sup>[46]</sup> Baha'is are encouraged to visit the Haifa-based Universal House of Justice, the highest Baha'i authority; however, for Yemenis residing in Yemen this pilgrimage is prohibitively difficult.<sup>[47]</sup>

Social service is a common thread among Baha'i communities around the world. For example, it is normal to find Baha'i women teaching other women sewing, reading and writing.<sup>[48]</sup> Some Baha'i social initiatives in Yemen have been organized on a much larger scale; one example is a project run in Taiz to educate members of the marginalized Muhamasheen minority. These activities have usually been run in coordination with Baha'i NGOs, such as Nida'a Foundation for Building & Coexistence and the Excellence Foundation for Social Development, which focuses on building awareness among youths on issues like peace and reconciliation, community development and social welfare

The Baha'i assemblies are not registered with the state, but they implement their projects in coordination with state institutions, through state-registered Baha'i NGOs. While these NGOs obtain funding from donors,<sup>[49]</sup> Baha'i assemblies are financed by what is called the Baha'i Fund. Baha'i individuals contribute to this fund to support community needs and social initiatives. Due to the limited financial resources of the Yemeni Baha'i community, the assemblies typically provide inexpensive services that are primarily delivered by volunteers. At times, Baha'i NGOs arrange for volunteer experts to meet the development needs of a certain community.

Soon after the Saudi-led coalition intervened in the war in late March 2015, Baha'i communities in Amran and Sana'a attempted to establish a school to cater to the local community's educational needs. The project was suspended in 2017, when some of the Baha'is involved were either arrested or targeted for arrest. In 2018, a Houthi-run court banned all Baha'i institutions and social activities in Houthi-controlled areas, Sakkaḥ said, as part of the judicial decision that mandated the execution of Yemeni Baha'i Hamed bin Haydara.<sup>[50]</sup> (For more on this, see *Baha'i Persecution and The Hamed Bin Haydara Case.*)

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45) "Electoral Process," Universal House of Justice, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/electoral-process>

46) Ibid.

47) Nadim Sakkaḥ, online interview by research team, November 28, 2020.

48) Anonymous Baha'i woman, online interview by Baha'i researcher, November 25, 2020.

49) Nadim Sakkaḥ, online interview by research team, November 28, 2020.

50) Ibid.

## Bahá'is in Wider Yemeni Society

The Baha'i faith proclaims the validity, unity and divinity of all religions, which means that adherents recognize and respect Islam and its prophet Mohammed. While this helps allay some suspicions about the Baha'i in Muslim societies, the Baha'i faith is nevertheless a distinct religion, which has its own prophet, rituals, and beliefs. Conversion to Baha'ism thus constitutes apostasy, according to Islam. If a Muslim state chooses to apply its apostasy laws, Baha'i individuals can face serious legal implications.<sup>[51]</sup>

Prominent Yemeni Baha'i Waleed Ayash was arrested several times on the basis of his religious affiliation before being exiled to Luxembourg last July. Prior to adopting the Baha'i faith, Ayash was a military officer and influential tribal sheikh in the Bani Matar area, about 30 kilometers west of Sana'a city. He joined the Baha'i faith in 2006, out of admiration for its humanistic values. Ayash's parents were shocked by this choice, feeling that it would destroy his life. Ayash subsequently left his high-ranking military position because it did not align with Baha'i values. His new faith also disqualified him from becoming a more senior tribal sheikh. Other members of his tribe, including his brother Akram, followed his example and joined the Baha'i religion. However, Ayash's wife remains Muslim.<sup>[52]</sup>

The Sana'a Center interviewed several Yemenis who had joined the Baha'i religion. Two had been Sunni Muslim, one had been Shia Zaidi Muslim, another had been Twelver Shia Muslim and one was previously atheist. All of them said they were drawn to the Baha'i religion because of its central principles – for instance, the emphasis on the unity of humanity and absolute gender equality – suit the contemporary era. They believe that Baha'u'llah was only one of many messengers, some of whom are still to come. These Baha'is stress that their religion does not contradict Islam, despite the fact that Muslims believe Mohammed was the final prophet. The Baha'i faith, they say, is simply a new religion better suited to the current era.<sup>[53]</sup>

One of the biggest challenges facing newly converted Baha'is in Yemen is the reaction of their families. Interviewees recounted many instances of immediate family members showing great resistance to their decision to join the religion and pushing them to change their mind. One of the interviewees eventually divorced

51) Karim Shafiq, "Bahá'is in Egypt: From Official Confession to Accusation of 'Apostasy' [AR]," Hafryat, May 8, 2019, البهائيون في مصر: من الاعتراف الرسمي حتى اتهامهم بـ "الردة" | حفريات (hafryat.com)

52) Waleed Ayash, online interview by research team, October 25, 2020.

53) Anonymous Yemeni Baha'is, online group interview by Baha'i researcher, November 11, 2020.

his wife because her family had insisted that she could not continue living with a non-Muslim.<sup>[54]</sup> Another interviewee said that his wife, after hearing of his new faith, left their home and stayed with her family in an attempt to force him to change his mind. When she realized that he would not comply with her demands, she returned home. He said that her family does not yet know that he is Baha'i.<sup>[55]</sup>

The Baha'is interviewed by the Sana'a Center noted that, before the war, they did not generally face animosity from Yemeni society; indeed, most Yemenis were not particularly familiar with their religion.<sup>[56]</sup> The level of awareness about Baha'is has increased markedly in the last six years, due to the group's systematic persecution by the Houthi authorities, according to Ayash. In some ways, this increased awareness has had a negative impact – the persecution of, and suspicions about, Baha'i communities have made Yemenis afraid of being targeted by authorities for affiliating with Baha'is. This social stigma has led some Baha'is to stop revealing their religious identity.<sup>[57]</sup>

## Baha'i Women

In general, women considering converting to the Baha'i religion face stronger pushback from their families than do male converts. A 20-year-old Baha'i woman told the Sana'a Center that most Yemeni families thought that converting to the religion would bring shame. In one case, a family pushed their daughter to marry two weeks after she declared her conversion to the Baha'i religion.<sup>[58]</sup> Another Baha'i woman, aged 25, said that her mother had threatened to end their relationship if she became Baha'i; this woman is now hiding her religious beliefs from her family.<sup>[59]</sup> In general, young women considering becoming Baha'i face particularly strong pushback from their families, which can include physical abuse.

The 20-year-old Baha'i woman stated that she had faced mistreatment, bullying and harassment from her teachers and colleagues at a university in Sana'a when they realized she was Baha'i. She clarified that her female coworkers were more tolerant, while the men she worked with viewed her as “a cheap and easy woman”

54) Anonymous Baha'i man, online interview by Baha'i researcher, November 9, 2020.

55) Anonymous Baha'i man, online interview by Baha'i researcher, November 4, 2020.

56) Ibid.

57) Anonymous Baha'i woman, online interview by research team, January 30, 2021.

58) Ibid.

59) Anonymous Yemeni Baha'is, online group interview by Baha'i researcher, November 11, 2020.



because she had changed her faith. All young Yemeni women fear shame, she said, so they are afraid to be connected to Baha'is in any way, because this relationship might result in their being followed, arrested or otherwise defamed by the Houthi authorities.<sup>[60]</sup>

A 35-year-old Baha'i woman, who converted nine months after her husband joined the religion, faced resistance from her family. The situation was complicated by the fact that her father is a Shia Zaidi imam. While the quarreling about her conversion has subsided, she no longer has the same relationship with her family.<sup>[61]</sup> A Muslim woman married to a Baha'i man told the Sana'a Center that she has been pressured by her family to get divorce. She noted, too, that differences between the religions, especially the different fasting periods,<sup>[62]</sup> cause her anxiety over practical issues.

The Baha'i faith allows members to marry outside of the religion. The children of Baha'i parents are expected to choose their religion when they are 15 years old, at which point they are believed to be spiritually mature. If they choose the Baha'i religion, they must register as a youth member.<sup>[63]</sup> Interviewees reported that marriage is one of the central difficulties that young Baha'is face. For women converts, finding a Baha'i husband can be difficult, in a conservative society in which arranged marriages are the norm and they are not expected to freely choose a partner. Baha'is do not encourage arranged marriage.

Before the war, Baha'i women seeking marriage had to contend with the limited number of eligible Baha'i men. Over the course of the war, obstacles to marriage have increased for both men and women. Houthi oppression in the north and security threats in the south have prevented Baha'is from gathering to celebrate or to practice their community activities.<sup>[64]</sup>

To validate a union, the Baha'i religion requires the acceptance of the bride and groom and both sets of parents. This is called "the acceptance of the six", and it represents another significant obstacle to marriage.<sup>[65]</sup> One interviewee, a 40-year-old Baha'i man, said that he was lucky the parents of his fiancée – a Muslim woman – accepted him, despite the disapproval of her brother.<sup>[66]</sup>

60) Anonymous Baha'i woman, online interview by research team, January 30, 2021.

61) Anonymous Baha'i woman, online interview by research team, January 30, 2021.

62) Anonymous Baha'i woman, online interview by research team, February 2, 2021.

63) "Letter on the Age of Spiritual Maturity," The Universal House of Justice, Department of the Secretariat, retrieved March 11, 2021, [https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19850411\\_001/1#148273398](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/19850411_001/1#148273398)

64) Anonymous Baha'i woman, online interview by research team, January 31, 2021.

65) "Bahai: Marriage and divorce," BBC, retrieved February 4, 2021, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/bahai/living/marriage\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/bahai/living/marriage_1.shtml)

66) Anonymous Yemeni Baha'is, online group interview by Baha'i researcher, November 11, 2020.

## Bahá'í Finances

Every Bahá'í assembly (local and national) must establish an independent Bahá'í fund, sometimes called “the Bahá'í box”, which is administered by a member of the assembly. The fund is replenished by contributions from the local Bahá'í community and, in some cases, from Bahá'í institutions inside Yemen. The funds are used for various initiatives, including to support Bahá'is in need and to finance development projects and emergency-relief efforts for the local community. Members of the local and national assemblies monitor and approve the spending of their respective funds.

One Bahá'í interviewee recounted how, when he became unemployed after the Houthi authorities confiscated his shop, the Bahá'í fund provided him with money to open a new shop.<sup>[67]</sup> However, these funds do not typically provide monthly allowances to unemployed Bahá'is, despite the fact that many in the community have been fired or are unable to find work because NGOs, companies and businessmen are afraid that any connection with the community will attract attention from Houthi authorities.<sup>[68]</sup>

Contributing to the faith and the community with land and real estate endowments to be inherited and administered by Bahá'í assemblies is a common practice. As a result of this mechanism, the Yemeni Bahá'í community has its own endowments of lands and houses.<sup>[69]</sup>

In August 2016, the Houthi authorities arrested a number of Bahá'is, including – by chance – one man who was in charge of a Bahá'í fund. The police raid seized US\$53,000 and confiscated a number of laptops, legal documents and land and property deeds that detailed Bahá'í real estate holdings.<sup>[70]</sup> The police did not document the seizure of this property.<sup>[71]</sup> The Houthi authorities have since seized at least two Bahá'í homes, one in Sana'a and another in Hudaydah. (One of them, Nadim Sakkaf's, was seized on September 13, 2017.) Houthi authorities subsequently issued legal documents justifying these seizures.<sup>[72]</sup>

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67) Anonymous Bahá'í man, online interview by research team, January 7, 2021.

68) Anonymous Bahá'í man, online interview by research team, February 1, 2021.

69) Nadim Sakkaf, online interview by research team, February 1, 2021.

70) Anonymous Yemeni Bahá'is, online group interview by Bahá'í researcher, November 11, 2020.

71) Ibid.

72) Anonymous Bahá'í man, online interview by Bahá'í researcher, November 28, 2020.

## State Recognition

Before the war, the Yemeni state partially recognized the Baha'i religion, enabling adherents to secure official documents. For example, when Nadim Sakkaḥ registered his child's birth certificate before the war, he listed "Baha'i" as the religion of the child's parents. This reportedly remained possible until 2014.<sup>[73]</sup> During the current conflict, when a Baha'i in Sana'a tried to register his religion on the birth certificate of his child, the Houthi officials firmly refused and listed him as Muslim.<sup>[74]</sup> Baha'i marriages are typically registered with the state following the religious ceremony, as is the case for Muslim unions. Divorces are also settled with the state. However, if both parents are Baha'i, child-custody issues are usually resolved in the Baha'i assembly.

For national identification cards, there is no requirement to state your religion or sect. Sakkaḥ said that government officials in charge of issuing IDs typically note the person's religion as Muslim, since this is true of the overwhelmingly majority of Yemenis. Death certificates also do not require religious affiliation to be listed. Baha'is forbid the transport of a corpse more than one hour's distance from where the person died.<sup>[75]</sup> So, while Baha'is have their own cemeteries in Sana'a, Aden and other big cities, adherents may be buried in other cemeteries if there is no Baha'i cemetery close by.

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73) Nadim Sakkaḥ, online interview by research team, February 1, 2021.

74) Anonymous Baha'i man, online interview by research team, February 1, 2021.

75) Baha'u'llah, Shoghi Effendi, and Universal House of Justice, "Baha'i burial and related laws," compiled by Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Baha'i Publications Australia, 2020, [https://bahai-library.com/compilation\\_bahai\\_burial\\_laws](https://bahai-library.com/compilation_bahai_burial_laws)

## BAHA'I PERSECUTION

Prior to the current war and the 2011 uprisings, Baha'is in Yemen had a relatively peaceful relationship with the regime of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. An 85-year-old Baha'i, who has lived in Yemen for 60 years, told the Sana'a Center that the only major problems the Baha'i community faced in North Yemen arose during the Iraq-Iran War, in the 1980s. During that period, Baha'is came under suspicion due to the faith's Persian origins, but Yemeni authorities eventually understood that the Baha'is were not supportive of the Iranian state.<sup>[76]</sup>

As a religious minority that did not interfere in politics, Baha'is were allowed, for the most part, to freely practice their beliefs.<sup>[77]</sup> In one exceptional situation, in 2008, the National Security Bureau (NSB) detained five Baha'is for almost four months, on the basis of suspicions regarding their connections to Iran. The accusations came amid tensions between Iran and Saleh, whose intelligence officials thought the Baha'i community was an Iranian cell; this led to the tightening of residency restrictions on non-Yemeni Baha'is in the country. At the time, conservative religious figures within the Islamist Islah party, which views the Houthis as a direct threat, accused the Baha'is of cooperating with Iran to support Houthi forces against the Yemeni army in Sa'ada.<sup>[78]</sup>

Sana'a Center researcher Bilqees al-Lahbi, who in 2008 was a member of a civic coalition devoted to defending human rights, notes that the targeting of Baha'is in this period was part of a larger campaign against religious minorities, including Ismailis and Twelvers, by then Republican Guard Commander Ahmed Ali Saleh and former President Saleh's nephew, Yahia Saleh, then commander of the Central Security Forces.

A number of non-Yemeni Baha'is who were targeted in the campaign, due to their alleged connections with Iran, had their assets confiscated and were expelled from Yemen. Other non-Yemeni Baha'is left Yemen due to harassment by security forces, according to Samah Subay, a lawyer at Yemen-based NGO Mwatana for Human Rights.<sup>[79]</sup>

76) Anonymous Baha'i woman, online interview by Baha'i researcher, November 25, 2020.

77) Waleed Ayash, online interview by research team, October 25, 2020.

78) Waleed Ayash, online interview by research team, October 25, 2020.

79) Samah Subay, online interview by research team, January 23, 2021.

Waleed Ayash was one of the five Yemeni Baha'is arrested in 2008. He told the Sana'a Center that he did not suffer from any mistreatment during his detention, although he was imprisoned with Houthi loyalists who were exposed to constant torture. The five detainees were released after the national Baha'i assembly clarified that Baha'is are prohibited from interfering in politics.

## The Hamed Bin Haydara Case

Despite this capricious harassment of religious minorities, the systematic persecution of Baha'is in Yemen only began in earnest with the imprisonment and torture of prominent Baha'i Hamed bin Haydara. Bin Haydara's parents emigrated from Iran to Yemen in 1954. They lived in Socotra, where Bin Haydara was born, in 1964, and where his father worked as a doctor for Sultan Issa bin Ali al-Afrar al-Mahri, the last ruler of the Sultanate of Al-Mahra and Socotra.<sup>[80]</sup> When the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen was formed, in 1967 – encompassing Yemen's southern governorates, including Socotra – Bin Haydara and his family resettled in Ajman, in the modern-day United Arab Emirates.<sup>[81]</sup> The family members were issued Emirati passports when the UAE was established, in 1971.

It was 1991 by the time Bin Haydara returned to Yemen, one year on from its unification. He lived between Yemen and the UAE until 1997, when he decided to settle permanently in Socotra, where he worked as an engineering contractor.

In December 2013, Bin Haydara was arrested by NSB agents while working at the LNG processing and export facility in Balhaf, Shabwa, and forcibly disappeared for nine months. Bin Haydara told the Sana'a Center that his arrest was influenced by hardliners in the Islah party, which rose to prominence after the 2011 uprisings that led to the end of Saleh's presidency. Salafists within the party had denounced the Baha'is in mosques and the media for organizing a youth conference in Sana'a in September 2013. According to Bin Haydara, security services had been tipped off to his involvement in the meeting. He told the Sana'a Center that he had played a role in the gathering, inviting Yemeni youth from different cities and regions.

Bin Haydara said he was violently arrested by a large group of security personnel, as if he were a dangerous criminal. They transferred him to an NSB prison in Sana'a, where he was put in solitary confinement and brutally tortured. His

80) "The Baha'i in Yemen [AR]," [Bahaiye.org](http://www.bahaiye.org/AR/About/Default.aspx), retrieved January 29, 2021, <http://www.bahaiye.org/AR/About/Default.aspx>

81) Kamal Haidra, online interview by research team, November 22, 2020.



captors viewed the Baha'i faith as a secret, dangerous religion associated with Israel. While detained, Bin Haydara was often referred to as an Iranian national, even though he was born in Yemen. His captors were implying that he was a spy.

After two weeks of torture and mistreatment, he said, he was forced to mark his fingerprint on 16 blank pages. These pages were later filled with "confessions" – for instance, that he was an Iranian spy who recruited youth to fight with the Houthis in Sa'ada and was trying to establish a Baha'i homeland in Socotra.

After nine months in the NSB prison, Bin Haydara was transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) prison in Sana'a and officially charged with threatening national security. He was able to contact his family for the first time and let them know he was still alive. Shortly thereafter, the Houthi forces took control of Sana'a and, with it, the prison. According to Bin Haydara, the Houthis initially showed him understanding, telling him that nothing he was accused of had been proven. Bin Haydara believed they would drop the accusations and release him. To his surprise, the Houthi authorities soon made similar allegations against him. Instead of spying for Iran, however, he was accused of spying for Israel.

Following these new allegations, Bin Haydara was brought into court a number of times. Each time, the judge rejected the case out of a lack of evidence. Bin Haydara said his imprisonment under Houthi control was less brutal than the conditions of his initial detention, as he was not beaten. His worst experiences were during his transfers to appear in court. Each time, he had to share a very small cell with a large number of prisoners. Bin Haydara's family members, especially his wife, were exposed to constant harassment during their visits to the Houthi-managed prisons.

After Bin Haydara had spent four years in prison, the judge finally relented and heard his case. In January 2018, the judge sentenced him to death, justifying the ruling on the grounds that it was a political order from the Houthi authorities.

Samah Subay, who attended the court sessions, said that the judge kept asking the prosecution to provide proof of their claims, but no evidence was presented. Subay noted that, during the session in which Bin Haydara was sentenced to death, a member of the prosecution said that the case was political and that, even if a death penalty were issued, a political pardon would be granted. The judge reportedly said the same thing before sentencing Bin Haydara.<sup>[82]</sup>

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82) Samah Subay, online interview by research team, February 3, 2021.

The rationale for the death sentence included accusations that Bin Haydara was actively proselytizing to bring Yemeni youth into the Baha'i religion and that he was working with authorities at the Socotra airport to facilitate the movement of Baha'is to the archipelago, in order to establish a Baha'i homeland there.

At the court session during which the sentencing was handed down, the judge also ordered the arrest of Bin Haydara's family. According to Subay, the prosecutor had threatened to arrest the accused's wife every court session, although she managed to escape arrest by moving residences often.<sup>[83]</sup> According to Bin Haydara, his wife finally left Sana'a for Aden, and then departed Yemen for several months, until the family was granted asylum in Europe.

When Bin Haydara was sentenced to death, all of his property was officially confiscated. According to Subay, his property had in fact been seized before the court's decision. In political cases, the police tend to confiscate everything during the arrest, she said.<sup>[84]</sup>

Bin Haydara's lawyers appealed the ruling, and hearings continued for another two years. The court upheld the death penalty in March 2020.<sup>[85]</sup> Later the same month, Mahdi al-Mashat, president of the Houthis' Supreme Political Council, pardoned all Baha'i prisoners.<sup>[86]</sup> In July, Bin Haydara and five other Baha'i prisoners were suddenly taken to a UN plane at Sana'a International Airport and sent into exile. They were given no opportunity to settle their affairs in the country or collect their belongings.<sup>[87]</sup> These former prisoners now live in Luxemburg, where Bin Haydara is receiving medical treatment for the damage inflicted during his torture by the NSB, which affected his hearing and ability to walk.<sup>[88]</sup>

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83) Ibid.

84) Ibid.

85) "Yemen: Huthi-run court upholds death sentence against Baha'i prisoner of conscience," Amnesty International, March 23, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/yemen-huthirun-court-upholds-death-sentence-against-bahai-prisoner-of-conscience/>

86) "Houthi authorities order the release of all Baha'i prisoners in Yemen," Baha'i International Community, March 25, 2020, <https://www.bic.org/news/houthi-authorities-order-release-all-bahai-prisoners-yemen>

87) "The Lesser of Two Evils: Yemen's Baha'is From Prison to Exile," Al-Monitor, August 10, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/yemen-houthis-release-exile-bahai-minority.html>

88) Hamed bin Haydara, online interview by research team, November 22, 2020.

## Houthi-Controlled Areas

All Yemenis face threats as a result of the struggle for power in southern governorates and Houthi oppression in the north. However, the dangers weigh much more heavily on a religious minority like the Baha'is, particularly in Houthi-controlled areas. All of the Baha'is interviewed by the Sana'a Center believe that the Houthi authorities have adopted a campaign of systematic persecution against the religion driven by Iranian policy – either via Iranian political influence or directly, via explicit orders from Tehran. While there is no hard evidence that Iran is driving the Houthi persecution of Baha'is in Yemen, the language used by Khomeini, Khamenei and the Houthis depicting adherents to the religious minority as Zionists, agents of imperialism and Jews is strikingly similar.<sup>[89]</sup>

In May 2017, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, noted that “the persistent pattern of persecution of the Baha'i community in Sana'a mirrors the persecution suffered by the Baha'is living in Iran.”<sup>[90]</sup> Nadim Sakkaf told the Sana'a Center that during his arrest in 2016, security officers told him that they had trained in Iran.<sup>[91]</sup>

Sakkaf's arrest came as part of the first decisive escalation in the Houthi campaign against the Baha'is. In August 2016, Houthi security forces arrested 67 people, including some women and children, at a youth gathering organized by Baha'i NGOs the Excellence Foundation for Social Development and Nida'a Foundation for Building & Coexistence. The purpose of the gathering, which was attended by youth, activists and NGOs, was to promote peaceful initiatives for local community development.<sup>[92]</sup>

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89) Mina Yazdani, “The Islamic Revolution's Internal Other: The Case of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Baha'is of Iran,” *Journal of Religious History*, vol. 36, no. 4 (December 2012), [https://www.academia.edu/9405045/The\\_Islamic\\_Revolution\\_s\\_Internal\\_Other\\_The\\_Case\\_of\\_Ayatollah\\_Khomeini\\_and\\_the\\_Baha\\_is\\_of\\_Iran](https://www.academia.edu/9405045/The_Islamic_Revolution_s_Internal_Other_The_Case_of_Ayatollah_Khomeini_and_the_Baha_is_of_Iran); Mina Yazdani, “The Confessions of Dolgoruki: Fiction and Masternarrative in Twentieth-Century Iran,” *Iranian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1 (January 2011), [https://www.academia.edu/7019702/Confessions\\_of\\_Dolgoruki\\_IS\\_44\\_Jan11](https://www.academia.edu/7019702/Confessions_of_Dolgoruki_IS_44_Jan11)

90) “Yemen must stop persecution of Baha'i community, urges UN expert on freedom of religion,” United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, May 22, 2017, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21643&LangID=E>

91) Nadim Sakkaf, online interview by research team, February 1, 2021.

92) “The Baha'i Community: A Brief History of the Recent Persecution,” Baha'i International Community, August 2020, <https://www.bic.org/situation-in-yemen/background>

More than half of the people detained at the gathering were released within a week because they were not Baha'i. Others remained in prison for months.<sup>[93]</sup> Sakkaf said that he was arrested with his wife, but the police eventually placed her under house arrest so she could care for their children.<sup>[94]</sup> Despite this, as Subay noted, Sakkaf's wife and sister-in-law remained in the prison longer than the other women who were arrested. While they were not beaten, the women were deprived of feminine hygiene products and not allowed to take showers.<sup>[95]</sup>

The second blow to the community came in April 2017, just days before the local spiritual assembly elections. In a series of raids, including on private homes, six people were arrested. One of them was released after a few months because he was not Baha'i. Another was released in December 2017 because he had been working for the International Red Cross, which pushed for his release; he was freed on the understanding that he would leave the country.

These instances of intimidation cast a shadow over the Baha'i community in Yemen. Some went into hiding, others fled Houthi-controlled areas or even resettled outside of Yemen. Many Baha'i have lost their livelihoods as a result of social stigma and outright intimidation. Sakkaf told the Sana'a Center that Houthi forces in civilian clothing raided his home in August 2016, while he and his wife were in prison, later confiscating it along with all of his belongings.

The four remaining prisoners taken during the 2017 raid stayed in detention, as did another prisoner who was detained in the 2016 raid, until they were all exiled with Bin Haydara in July 2020. One of them, Waleed Ayash, had been arrested before. But he told the Sana'a Center that this final prison experience was the most terrifying. His treatment by the Houthis, Ayash said, was much worse than that doled out by the NSB officials who detained him during the Sa'ada wars. Immediately after his arrest, the torture began. Then, the Houthi management put him in a cell with Al-Qaeda and Islamic State prisoners, who were told that Ayash was an infidel and apostate. These prisoners cruelly beat him.

Ayash said that the most horrible period in the prison was just before the clashes between the Houthi forces and former President Saleh, in early December 2017. The prison was very crowded at that time and witnessed the worst forms of mistreatment, including the torture of female prisoners. Such abuse of women would have been virtually unthinkable in Yemen prior to Houthi rule, Ayash said.<sup>[96]</sup>

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93) Ibid.

94) Nadim Sakkaf, online interview by research team, February 1, 2021.

95) Samah Subay, online interview by research team, February 3, 2021.

96) Waleed Ayash, online interview by research team, October 25, 2020.

When – on July 30, 2020 – the Houthi authorities allowed the six Baha’i prisoners to board a UN airplane and leave the country, they did so as a result of concerted international pressure and only after a long negotiation process.<sup>[97]</sup> In exchange for the prisoners’ release, the Houthi authorities received six UN-chartered planeloads of medical supplies.<sup>[98]</sup>

Of the released prisoners, only Bin Haydara had received a political pardon – because he was the only who had been convicted. The cases against the other five who were exiled as a condition of their release continue to be prosecuted in the Houthi-run Specialized Criminal Court, despite Al-Mashat’s general amnesty.<sup>[99]</sup> So, too, do the cases of another 19 Baha’is arrested in the 2017 raids, although these individuals are no longer imprisoned, having secured their release through guarantors. The court described the released Baha’is as fugitives and threatened to imprison their guarantors. Subay believes that the ongoing prosecution can only be explained by a desire to pursue the confiscation of Baha’i properties and assets.<sup>[100]</sup>

The Sana’a Center contacted senior Houthi leaders Hussein al-Ezzi and Abdulmalik al-Ajri to allow them to comment on the rationale behind the ongoing trial. They claimed to have no knowledge of the trial and said that these cases were closed when Al-Mashat granted Baha’i prisoners amnesty. However, the same officials, in conversation months earlier with a Sana’a Center source, said that the continued prosecution had been pushed ahead by loyalists of former President Saleh at the Specialized Criminal Court, in Sana’a. They claimed that these court officials were pursuing their own agenda in targeting the Baha’is. (It should be noted that senior Houthi authorities are in complete control of the security and justice systems in areas under the group’s control.)

Al-Ezzi declined to provide the Sana’a Center with further comment on the Baha’i situation, claiming that the center was biased.<sup>[101]</sup> Another Houthi leader, who requested anonymity in order to speak openly, said that the Baha’is are not

97) “The Lesser of Two Evils: Yemen’s Baha’is From Prison to Exile,” Al-Monitor, August 10, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/yemen-houthis-release-exile-bahai-minority.html>

98) Yemeni activist Hind Al-Eryani worked closely with UN special envoy Martin Griffiths and Houthi leaders to secure the release of the six Baha’is.

99) The five released prisoners besides Bin Haydara were: Waleed Ayash, Akram Ayash, Kayvan Ghaderi, Badiullah Sanai and Wael al-Arieghie. See: “Houthi court continues trials against Bahai in Yemen despite release order,” The National, January 11, 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/houthi-court-continues-trials-against-bahai-in-yemen-despite-release-orders-1.1143788>

100) Samah Subay, online interview by research team, February 3, 2021.

101) Hussein al-Ezzi, WhatsApp messages to the research team, January 27, 2021.



considered a minority group because the community does not have a real social or political presence in Yemen. “They are just individuals,” he said, adding that he could not understand why people would convert to another religion.

It should be noted that, despite the Baha’is increasingly outsider status in society, many adherents in Houthi-controlled areas still enjoy some support and protection from their tribes.<sup>[102]</sup> The Houthis must take this into account when dealing with Baha’is in order not to inflame social tensions.

## Outside Houthi Control

While Baha’is in southern governorates outside of Houthi control have not suffered systematic persecution, they live in fear of the rise of militias and extremist religious groups – this fear is particularly acute because of their membership in a religious minority. After his release from Sana’a, on January 11, 2017, Sakkaḥ was arrested along with another Baha’i at Aden International Airport on suspicion of having Iranian connections; they were forcibly disappeared for months.<sup>[103]</sup> One Baha’i told the Sana’a Center that he was mistakenly arrested by an unidentified southern militia for reasons other than his religious beliefs. He was unable to determine to whom the group answered.

Between 2015 and 2016, when Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) dominated Mukalla city and controlled other parts of Hadramawt governorate, some Baha’i families, frightened of being targeted as apostates, fled to other places in Yemen. Some Baha’is in southern governorates temporarily stopped revealing their religious beliefs.<sup>[104]</sup>

The internationally recognized government of President Abdo Rabu Mansour Hadi, which nominally governs areas outside of Houthi control, has stated that the Baha’is should be considered Yemeni citizens with full rights. While this move may be aimed at winning international points against the Houthi authorities, the absence of a functioning state in nominally Hadi-controlled areas makes it impossible to enforce such policies.<sup>[105]</sup>

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102) Anonymous Baha’i man, online interview by research team, January 23, 2021.

103) Samah Subay, online interview by research team, February 3, 2021.

104) Anonymous Yemeni Baha’is, online group interview by Baha’i researcher, November 11, 2020.

105) Ibid.

## War of Perceptions

In the wake of the 2011 uprisings in Yemen, disinformation campaigns conducted by a variety of actors in mosques and the media, as well as on social media, started to portray the Baha'is in a way that justified their persecution. But the anti-Baha'i propaganda started in earnest during Hamed bin Haydara's first appearance before a Houthi-run court, in 2015. All local media organizations were invited to the trial. From that point on, Houthi-run media promulgated the prosecution's line – that Bin Haydara was an Israeli spy, who was trying to establish a Baha'i state in Socotra.<sup>[106]</sup>

At the same time, various public figures defamed the faith. For instance, before the Houthi-Saleh alliance unraveled, in late 2017, Mohammed al-Maswary, the former lawyer of ex-President Saleh, wrote Facebook posts accusing the Baha'is of apostasy and of trying to abolish the principle of jihad to defend the country. He sought to stigmatize Baha'is by claiming that their religion allows incestual marriage.<sup>[107]</sup>

Salafi and Islahi figures participated in the anti-Baha'i campaign. The Salafi scholar Khaled al-Wasabi,<sup>[108]</sup> as well as Abdbullah Abdulmajeed al-Zindani, the son of another conservative scholar,<sup>[109]</sup> posted in 2016 about the Baha'is being apostates supported by the US to destroy Muslim societies. Rashida al-Qaily, a well-known Islahi writer, said on Facebook in 2018 that arresting the Baha'is was one of the few good things the Houthi authorities had done.<sup>[110]</sup>

Interestingly, Houthi figures and figures from the Islah party have blamed each other for helping to spread the Baha'i religion – as if the faith had only just emerged in Yemen.<sup>[111]</sup>

106) Hamed bin Haydara, online interview by research team, November 22, 2020.

107) Mohammed al-Mansoury, "Permissible marriage ... [AR]," Facebook, August 16, 2016, [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=296697144026660&id=100010591292656](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=296697144026660&id=100010591292656)

108) Khaled al-Wasabi, "Sheikh Khaled al-Wasabi: A group in Sana'a called for the Baha'i faith ... [AR]," Facebook, August 19, 2016, [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=536405476550843&id=100005441857438](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=536405476550843&id=100005441857438)

109) Abdullah al-Zindani, "What is behind the growing Baha'i activity in Sana'a?" Facebook, August 14, 2016, [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=10154419047956823&id=691846822](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10154419047956823&id=691846822)

110) Rashidah al-Qaily, "I say it with all conviction and frankness ... [AR]," Facebook, October 13, 2018, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1094962177327526&id=100004412617023](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1094962177327526&id=100004412617023)

111) Anonymous Baha'i man, online interview by research team, January 7, 2021.

In 2013, incitement against the Baha'is had become part of the educational curriculum at the University of Science and Technology, a private institution established and administered by the Islah party. That year, Islamic Culture, a textbook read by all UST students, had a Baha'i section added, which described the religion as part of the Zionist movement.<sup>[112]</sup> In early 2018, the Houthi authorities followed suit, making a book called *The Israeli-Arab Conflict* part of the mandatory curriculum at Sana'a University. This book describes the Baha'is as a Zionist movement. Consequently, Baha'i students in these and other schools and universities are now exposed to bullying and insults from students and teachers.

Abdulmalik al-Houthi, the leader of the armed Houthi movement, committed perhaps the strongest act of incitement against the Baha'is when he mentioned them in three speeches. On November 27, 2017, on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday, Al-Houthi stated that the Baha'is are paid and motivated by the US and Israel. On March 23, 2018, Al-Houthi heavily criticized the Baha'is, describing them as "satanic" and "engaged in a war against Islam."<sup>[113]</sup> On March 29, 2021, Al-Houthi gave a speech in which he said that the Americans were trying to create new religions in Yemen in order to suppress the ascendancy of Islam, naming the Baha'i faith as one of these religions.

This targeting of a religious minority by the most senior leader in a de facto government is unprecedented in Yemen's modern history. This defamation has had devastating consequences for Baha'is in Houthi-controlled areas, reinforcing the growing body of evidence that the persecution against Baha'is is systemic.

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112) See: "The Sectarian Sects (Babi, Baha'i, Qadiani): Episode 8 [AR]," University of Science and Technology, April 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YArIUFsMoRg&feature=youtu.be>

113) "Abdulmalik al-Houthi speech on the anniversary of Yemen's entry into Islam [AR]," YouTube, March 23, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ioy\\_G-rlMX4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ioy_G-rlMX4)

## CONCLUSION

The Baha'i community in Yemen is an exceedingly small minority, with no more than a few thousand members. Before the Arab Spring, Baha'is lived relatively normal lives, facing the same daily challenges as other Yemenis. Believers did sometimes face questions from community or family members who were not familiar with the religion. Otherwise, however, societal attitudes were generally tolerant and restrained.

Over the past decade, as Baha'is came under attack by political and religious groups, the religious minority developed a sinister image in the public eye. That Baha'is have coexisted peacefully in Yemeni society for decades has been overlooked by factions seeking to blame each other for the presence of the Baha'i faith in Yemen. In the case of the Baha'is, the Islah party and the Houthi authorities have pursued similar strategies of persecution, although Islahi figures have largely stopped harassing Baha'is since the war started. The Baha'i openness to new adherents poses a threat to these groups, which accuse the young religion of apostasy.

The current situation of the Baha'is represents a critical test for these groups: do they have the ability to behave like political bodies governed by the rule of law and respectful of religious diversity?

Both the Islah party and the Houthi authorities have framed the Baha'is as a non-Yemeni group – regardless of their Yemeni citizenship, which affords them basic rights. Even Baha'is who are third-generation Yemenis, such as Bin Haydara's daughter, are treated as if they are not real citizens.

This emphasis on the faith's non-Yemeni origins and ties to Iran and Israel seeks to portray the Baha'i religion as an exotic system of beliefs brought into the country through a foreign conspiracy. As a result, diasporic Baha'is are careful how they communicate with followers of the religion in Yemen. Baha'i representatives at the United Nations told the Sana'a Center that they have put in place a policy of indirect communication to protect Baha'is in Yemen. "We are informed immediately of developments like imprisonment and court dates, but never directly for their own safety," Baha'i representative Diane Ala'i said. "We have the same policy for the Baha'is in Iran, so that they won't face one more false accusation for being in direct communication with us."<sup>[114]</sup>

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114) Diane Ala'i, UN representative of the Baha'i international community in Geneva, online interview by research team, October 29, 2020.

The persecution of Baha'is in Houthi-controlled Yemen has intensified due to the Houthi movement's ties with Iran – which remains the only other country to have systematically persecuted the religious minority. In addition to the gratification of Iran, this persecution provides several benefits for the Houthis. Accusing Baha'i individuals of apostasy provides legal cover to loot and confiscate their properties. Houthi discourse emphasizing that the presence of Baha'is in Yemen is evidence of a Zionist conspiracy helps create an enemy to strengthen Houthi coherence. Finally, conditioning the release of imprisoned Baha'is on the fulfillment of demands from the international community gives the Houthis incentive to keep detaining them.

The increasing awareness of human rights violations during the war has led President Hadi's internationally recognized government, a significant part of which is Islahi, to defend the Baha'is. It remains unclear how serious the government is about this religious minority; in any case, it has little capacity to enforce such policies. Nonetheless, the stance helps the Baha'is by contributing to the growing awareness of the legal right of freedom of religion in Yemen, which is the basis for much of the support that activists, lawyers, journalists and NGOs have shown for the Baha'i cause.

Baha'is have a long history in Yemen. The vast majority of today's Baha'i population in Yemen were born in the country.<sup>[115]</sup> Yet, even if it were the case that all of them had non-Yemeni origins, this should not deprive them of their right to live peacefully and enjoy the same basic rights as other law-abiding citizens. The Baha'i religion rejects participation in politics or fighting, which means that it should not be seen as a threat by Yemen's political powers. Dragging the Baha'i into conflicts is fundamentally at odds with the nature of the religion, and the persecution of the Baha'i in Yemen is in contravention of fundamental human rights.

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115) Ibid.

## Looking Ahead: Recommendations

The international community should continue exerting pressure on the Houthi authorities, both in the media and through other channels, regarding the rights of Baha'is. This campaign, however, should take into consideration the following:

- While international pressure appears to have played a role in the Houthi decision to release the six imprisoned Baha'is, policymakers should not allow the Houthis to use the Baha'is as bargaining chips to extort the international community.
- It is important to clarify that the Baha'is are not outsiders; they are a peaceful minority made up by and large of Yemeni citizens that must be protected.
- Since the persecution of Baha'is in Yemen is a relatively new phenomenon, policymakers must consider intervening before it becomes more normalized or institutionalized, as witnessed in Iran. The recent release of Baha'is from prison should not be interpreted as a sign that Baha'i persecution is waning and international pressure can be eased.
- In areas outside of Houthi control, minorities such as Baha'is may be exposed to more threats than other social categories during military clashes or security chaos. International pressure on and monitoring of different militias, especially forces affiliated with the internationally recognized government, must be maintained to protect these minorities.
- In any future peace agreements, the rights of minorities must be included. This could come in the form of freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination clauses in a new constitution.





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