

# Faith + Values

Page C1 // January 20, 2012 // The Huntsville Times

## A FIGHT FOR RIGHTS



In 1979, members of the Revolutionary Guard raze the House of Bab, the site in Shiraz, Iran, where in 1844 Siyyid 'Ali-Muhammad, known as the Bab, or Gateway, declared the revelation of the new prophet who would come to show that true progress lies in love and compassion, not force and coercion. Baha'is have been persecuted both under the Shah's regime and also under the Islamic Republic. [Courtesy of Baha'i International Community]

### Baha'i, other religious minorities in Iran want an opportunity for education, jobs

By Kay Campbell  
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Religious identification in the Islamic Republic of Iran is a multiple-choice question: Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian.

But there is no box for "other" for the 300,000 or so members of the Baha'i faith who live in Iran when they fill out government forms or work applications.

And that means, says Geoffrey Tyson of Huntsville, that Baha'is are officially barred from many professional jobs — and from studying at the colleges and universities that would prepare them for those jobs.

In fact, six professors are still in prison after their arrest in May because they dared to



Geoffrey Tyson

teach Baha'i students. They are charged with "conspiracy against national security" in order "to further the aims of the deviant sect."

"And education is such an

essential right, a basic building block of being human," said Tyson, 27, who from his home in Huntsville is the general manager of Education Under Fire, an international organization working to protect the education rights of religious minorities in Iran. "This is not even about religious freedom so much as it is about educational equity and justice."

The Baha'i faith was defined in the mid-1800s by the prophet Baha'u'llah, who was imprisoned and exiled for teaching a revelation that came after Mohammad's, the equality of men and women, the unity of all religions and the possibility of world peace.

Ever since their formation around Baha'u'llah's teachings,



#### Freeing education

Become involved in the worldwide drive to influence a change in laws in Iran that are preventing members of the Baha'i faith and other religious minorities from pursuing higher education and professional jobs within Iran.

The campaign, with partnership from Amnesty International, is being managed from Huntsville.

Sign a petition at [EducationUnderFire.com](http://EducationUnderFire.com), where information on ordering the 30-minute documentary about the situation is also posted.

Huntsville-based Geoffrey Tyson, the organization's general manager, can be reached at [Info@EducationUnderFire.com](mailto:Info@EducationUnderFire.com).

Join a weekly conference call, Sundays at 4 p.m., Central Time, with leaders in education rights and Iranian policy specialists around the world. 641-715-3200, Access code 678569.

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# Rights

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Baha'is have been harassed, executed, imprisoned and otherwise discriminated against in the Muslim world, especially, and sometimes, also in the Christian world.

## No license for Baha'is

But life for Baha'is is particularly grim in Iran. That's where Baha'is are seen as the worst kind of heretics: Ones who have taken some of the truths of Islam and added to them the further sayings of another prophet and then also preached belief in unity of all faiths.

If you want to make someone really, really mad, it

turns out, suggest that what they believe about God is not really that much more complete than what another groups believes.

Baha'is in Iran can't get business licenses, can't get approved to work in computing, real estate, medicine, even cosmetics or food preparation. They can't get married and are having trouble finding a place to bury their dead. Baha'is' cemeteries have been desecrated, their homes razed, the gatherings of a few friends for religious holidays deemed acts of treason.

But people getting jailed by one or the other of repressive countries around the world isn't news, said David Hoffman, a retired real estate

developer who founded Education under Fire. Hoffman and his wife, who was born in Iran, are also Baha'is.

What's unusual about Iran's 30-year ban on Baha'is going to college is that it unblushingly targets the right to learn of an entire group, Hoffman said.

"People get put in jail around the world all the time," Hoffman said from his office in Florida. "The Iranian government, in their attempt to subjugate and marginalize the Baha'is have made a really big mistake messing with education because that's something the right to which everyone will defend."

## A world of friends

Included in the defenders are Nobel Peace Prize laureates Bishop Desmond Tutu and Jose Ramos-Horta, the president of East Timor.

Their jointly written letter pleads with the world's academic community to call on the Iranian government to release the people they

arrested in May who are leaders in the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education. The BIHE is an underground college program that has operated in Iran since 1987.

A group of intrepid professors – including both Muslims and Baha'is – organized the first classes for the BHIE, a web of house classes and online classes. Universities around the world, including Harvard University, accept credits from BIHE, making graduate school possible outside of Iran.

The parliaments of Canada and London have issued statements, Brazilians have called for an end to the policy, and a resolution about the situation is working its way through the U.S. House and Senate.

The groundswell of support since Iran's crackdown in May has been heartening, Hoffman said – and may come in time to reverse the current emergency. Iran, he said, does consider its image around the world, and Education under Fire has mobi-

lized objections from around the world.

"They were executing Baha'is in the 1980s," Hoffman said. "They don't do that anymore."

And a similar crackdown in 1998 eased after international pressure, Tyson said.

## Heroic resilience

According to updates posted at Bahai.org, the faith's official website, just since 2004, some 504 Baha'is have been arrested in Iran, with 95 still being held on nebulous charges of proselytizing and plotting against the government for actions as innocuous as placing flowers on the gravesite of a dead relative.

To explain the situation, Hoffman, who has a background in film, has made a 30-minute documentary, which was co-sponsored by Amnesty International, to tell the stories through the voices of survivors and people working for human rights in Iran.

The film is surprisingly

uplifting, Tyson said.

"The whole point is not to place Iran or Muslims in a bad light," Tyson said. "There are Muslims and Iranians working sided-by-side in the BIHE. The point is to constrain the regulations that are seeking to suffocate an entire population of people. This is the story of resilience, and realizing the determination of a community to learn and to grow."

Tyson, whose degree from UAH is in political science and literature, spent three years after his graduation working at the Baha'i center in Israel. It was his work there that brought him to the attention of the Education Under Fire team, which brought him on board in November.

"It's a global movement," Tyson said. "Our goal is to have 25,000 signatures by May."

He expects the goal to be easily reached.

"This is an action that everybody can be part of," he said.